

## Radical Hope: Isaiah 11:1-9

Good morning, my friends.

I want to start with the good old days, so let's start with King David. In the Bible, King David is the greatest king ever. He's a beautiful man, a poet and a warrior, a great leader in war and in peace. He's not a perfect person, but he's loved by God and loved by his people. His city of Jerusalem is the blessed home of God on earth. In the Bible, for a thousand years after David, people looked back on David's times as the best of times, the good old days, the golden age.

Today's reading from the book of Isaiah originated hundreds of years later, and in a much more troubled time. The once-unified kingdom of David is split in two, a house divided, and both halves are eventually conquered by larger and more powerful empires. Jerusalem is eventually sacked and, even worse, the temple in Jerusalem is destroyed -- the temple that people thought of as the physical residence of God is destroyed by foreigners, and God does nothing to stop it. And the leaders of the people become refugees, and are carried off into exile.

This is an atmosphere of past and impending national disaster, and in this atmosphere the prophet Isaiah lived and wrote. A lot of what Isaiah wrote is gloom and doom, as you would expect, considering the troubled times. The chapter right before today's reading is all about God's coming judgment: bad things are about to happen, and

they're going to happen because we deserve them. Here's what Isaiah put right before today's reading:

This very day he will ... shake his fist  
at the mount of daughter Zion,  
the hill of Jerusalem.

Look, the Sovereign, the LORD of hosts,  
will lop the boughs with terrifying power;  
the tallest trees will be cut down,  
and the lofty will be brought low.  
He will hack down the thickets of the forest with an ax,  
and Lebanon with its majestic trees will fall. (Isaiah 10:32-34)

Grim stuff! But then, right at the bottom of this long grim decline, we suddenly find today's wonderful, hopeful reading. And I have to say that in some ways this hopefulness seems way over the top. It was time for a message of hope, certainly. The people needed something to cling to. But why did Isaiah have to make it so radical? One moment we have God swinging his axe; the next, from the blasted stump, a whole new wonderful world grows. This text doesn't just predict relief for the people -- it predicts a new world so radically, wonderfully different that it's scarcely recognizable. But if Isaiah wanted to comfort people, shouldn't he have offered a smaller prophecy of hope? It could have been so much easier to believe.

I picture Isaiah writing this. He's in his home office, sitting at his computer, working on his first draft. He starts small. He writes: "Our enemies will leave us alone. We'll be able to go home and rebuild. The good old days will come again." That would have been so much easier to believe! One could even argue that it came true, at least for a

while -- under the Persian empire, the exiles finally got to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. So we could point to that first-draft prophecy and say, "See? Isaiah was right!"

But no, Isaiah is not happy with the first draft. He's a true prophet, and when he has an inspiration from God he can't bear to water it down. He knows perfectly well that a less ambitious prophecy would be easier for people to believe, but he just can't settle for that. He grumbles a bit, then hits the delete key.

And it's on to the second draft. Isaiah is getting warmed up now. He predicts the coming of an amazingly good king, a descendant of King David no less. "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse," he writes. "With righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth." Now let's face it: at this point, by the second draft, we already have a nearly unbelievable prophecy. Because when was there ever a king who decided with equity for the meek of the earth? It's almost a contradiction in terms. You just don't get to be king that way.

Of course, we Christians read this passage during Advent because we see it as pointing to Jesus. The Gospels work very hard to establish that Jesus is this shoot from the stump of Jesse. Jesse was King David's father, so "the stump of Jesse" is a poetic way of saying "the pitiful remainder of David's kingdom and lineage." In Luke's version of the birth story, Mary and Joseph have to travel to Bethlehem. Why? Because that's the city of David, and Joseph was "descended from the house and

family of David." That's Luke hitting us hard with this message: Jesus is King David's descendant. If that's not enough, Luke gives a genealogy for Jesus, showing his descent through many generations from King David. Matthew also gives a genealogy, not the same as Luke's, but again going back to King David. These things are part of the story because the Gospel writers wanted to make this connection to the tradition clear. Jesus, for them, is the fulfillment of this and other prophecies about the return of the king.

And Jesus did show us a new way to live, and Jesus did give us a new way to think about our relationship with God. And unlike any secular king, Jesus actually did "decide with equity for the meek of the earth," just as Isaiah wrote. So even though Isaiah's second draft was pretty audacious, we Christians can point to Jesus and say, "See? Isaiah was right."

Or we could have, if Isaiah had stopped with his second draft -- but no, he's still not happy with it. As audacious as it is, this second draft still isn't strong enough for him. It still doesn't live up to his inspiration about what God is going to do in this new world. So Isaiah grumbles some more, and deletes the second draft, and starts again. Now he's on a roll. He puts in the idea that the good old days will come again. He puts in all those things about the incredibly wonderful descendant of King David who will come. Then he really pulls out all the stops. He writes: "The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid ... the cow and the bear shall graze ... the lion shall eat straw like the ox." Oh, my. I picture Mrs. Isaiah reading the screen over

his shoulder, and shaking her head here. "Nobody's going to believe that, dear!" How could this possibly come true?

Most interpreters take this passage metaphorically, of course. The animals here represent people like us, people who are ruled by animal passions. In the new world of God people won't act like wolves any more; people will be truly and compassionately human. The image of wolves living peaceably with lambs means that rich people won't prey on the poor, and strong people won't exploit the weak.

But this is still awfully hard to believe, isn't it? In spite of Jesus' life and teaching, I still haven't seen this part of the prophecy come true. The world has gone on for the last two thousand years, grinding people up just the same. In this realistic world, wolves eat lambs. Big fish eat little fish. The rich get richer, and the poor fight wars for them.

And many of us today have given up hope that the world can be any different. We see no point in hoping for anything better. We have come to believe that people are basically selfish, and that this is natural, that it's inevitable, even that it's a good thing -- because our economic system seems to depend on it. We have come to believe that it is a good thing for big fish to eat little fish: big fish deserve to be big because they're the most successful eaters; little fish look up to big fish and want to be like them; the struggle to become the big fish is what makes the world go around -- or, at least, the U.S. economy, which is what really matters. We have become resigned to the belief that we are essentially animals, and if we have to be animals, it's better to be wolves

than lambs. To this way of thinking, it is no more possible for people to become unselfish than for lions to become vegetarians.

So, for many of us, Isaiah's vision of the peaceable kingdom is dead on arrival. Nice words; empty promises. We've lost hope. And without hope we can't see. We can't see how the world could be any other way, and therefore we can't see anything wrong with the way it is.

I say again, without hope we can't see. Poor people can't get health care? Well, that's too bad, but it's just the way it is. Good health is just one of the rewards of wealth. If there weren't such rewards, people wouldn't want to work hard. Big fish get health care, little fish don't.

Without hope, we can't see. Family farmers lose their farms? Well, that's just the way it is. Market forces, you know. There are bound to be losers as well as winners. Terribly sorry for them and all that, but that's the way it is. Big farms eat little farms.

Without hope, we can't see. Carrying a concealed weapon? Sure! It's a dangerous world out there. Crazy people shooting up malls. People want what we have; we have to be able to defend ourselves. Peace through strength, as the Romans said. Nonviolence was all right for Jesus, but let's get real.

Without hope, we can't see. Have a terrorist suspect you need to interrogate? Don't

be squeamish! It's a dog-eat-dog world. Maybe Jesus wouldn't strap this guy to the waterboard, but luckily he's not in charge.

O my friends, without hope, we can't see what's wrong with the world. But Advent is a season of hope, and this passage of Isaiah is a message of hope. So let's dare to read this bizarre, radical, wonderful final draft of the prophecy again. With hope, we can see more clearly. Hope enters us like the smell of a Christmas dinner, sharpening our appetite for justice. Close your eyes for a moment, and listen to this again, and imagine, just make believe, that it is actually possible for people to live like this:

The wolf shall live with the lamb,  
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,  
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,  
and a little child shall lead them.  
The cow and the bear shall graze,  
their young shall lie down together;  
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.  
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,  
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.  
They will not hurt or destroy  
on all my holy mountain; (Isaiah 11:6-9a)

With your eyes closed, picture this, the peaceable kingdom of radical hope. Now open them. Hope hurts, doesn't it? Because we're not there yet. We have some changes to make, in our society and in ourselves. But at least, with hope, we can see where to start.

Frankly, I don't know how this radical hope can come true. I don't see how it will be possible for us all to become truly and compassionately human. I'm only a first-year

seminary student. I'm sure in another year I'll have all the answers. But, for now, Isaiah actually gives us a clue about how this impossible world can be possible. It's in the very last line; do you remember it?

They will not hurt or destroy  
on all my holy mountain;  
For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD  
as the waters cover the sea. (Isaiah 11:9)

This is the final and most radical hope of all: the hope that this amazing change will happen without force. God doesn't force wolves to make nice with lambs. God doesn't make lions choke down straw against their will. God doesn't compel snakes to hide resentfully in their dens. All these things happen, not by force, but just by persuasion; just by becoming full of the knowledge of God; just by listening, and looking, with vision sharpened by hope.

I sometimes struggle to keep hope alive; I know it's a struggle for many of us. But it's Advent now, and hope is in the air. So this is my prayer today: Dear God, with your radical hope, touch our hearts, and open our eyes.

Amen.

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