

The Wolf Shall Live with the Lamb

Isaiah 11:1-10

Lessons from Isaiah: Images of God's Messianic Kingdom on Earth

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Isaiah clearly states that things will be different regarding the animal kingdom and regarding the way animals and human beings relate to each other in the kingdom of God. The wolf will feed with the lamb, the leopard will be at rest with the goat. The calf and the lion will grow fat together. Together their young will rest together. A lion will eat straw like an ox and a nursing child will fondle the hole of a cobra. And the viper's young will be handled by the toddler, who will put his hand on them. They will do no harm; they will not destroy.

In Chapters 9 and 10, Isaiah gives two very strong images about the state of things that lead up to this prophecy. There's an international metaphor that says the nations of the world and the states of Israel are at continual war with each other. Ephraim and Samaria are dealing with each other out of pride and arrogance. The Philistines and Arabs are constantly gnawing at Israel, devouring them at every opportunity. Isaiah talks about the nations states chewing off the heads of Israel as well as the tails. In a bit of humor the heads are called the elders and dignitaries and the lion prophets are called the tails. Not good for pastors in those days.

There's no pity for the young or the old, or widows or orphans. There's a constant burning down of farms and forests. People consume each other in the images that they are gorging out. But they are still hungry, because they can't be satisfied in their souls. Their oppressive laws are robbing the poor--widows are seen as part of the spoils of conflict and orphans considered fair prey. Terrorists destroy and plunder. It is not a good time in Israel and Judah.

There's another image that is a more domesticated one. It's the image of the simple village where families are trying to live at peace with nature. Humans and domestic animals are trying to be at peace with the wild animals in proximity to one another but it is hard. The predators are preying on the domestic stock, and the snakes that would normally keep control of the rats are posing a constant threat to the children who play on the mud floors of the huts. Even to this day, India loses up to a thousand children a year from snake bites because the children play on mud floors. There isn't enough space for safety.

It is a time of survival of the fittest. It is Darwinian pattern of life. You have to work up the food chain to make it. Aggression wins, and winning is everything. Hierarchy stands: power from above always controls weakness below. Winners have more power. The stronger, faster, smarter ones are the ones who succeed. It's a little bit like today, where the books tell us to swim with the sharks and have the ethics of Attila the Hun in order to make it in business. In our reality TV shows, those who survive have the wiles of the Darwinian survival instinct and they will win the battle. We saw a glimpse of this many years ago in the famous Disney cartoon, ³Bambi,² where the message is clear: the main fear the deer have is the human animal that can hunt and kill them. Humanity breeds fear in creation. Chuck Colson says in our contemporary cities, like Washington, D.C., the barbarians have briefcases.

Why is it that fear tends to pervade the marketplace? In a book about driving fear out of the workplace, Kathleen Ryan and Dan Oestreich talk about why fear persists. There are two basic reasons: people are functioning out of self-interest, and they often achieve that self-interest at the expense of people around them. Survival of the fittest. They describe managers who are hard to replace so, in a conflict, the employee must go. Or a view of senior management is that they may not get back to you right away, but they will get you back. Feedback is just another form of retaliation. After a while, one manager says he gave up trying to treat everybody fairly. Some deserve it but others don't. There's a cycle of mistrust and fear that permeates organizations. Negative assumptions about how people relate to each other lead to self-protection and defensive behavior, which leads to aggressive responses and, again, negative assumptions and self-protective behavior that leads to aggression. And the cycle goes on and on. The predator attacks the prey, the prey becomes the predator and we go through one more cycle.

Some churches actually energize predatorial pastors. Ragers -- pastors that are coercive and intimidating, that seduce congregations -- manipulative, passive aggressive. Congregations allow it to happen because they are addicted to their charisma, preaching and presence. Don't do that. It's not a good thing.

How will this Darwinian devastation be revealed and reversed? How will the predators stop preying on the unsuspecting, how will fear be removed finally, how will the aggression be stopped? Isaiah says it comes because God comes to the midst of the people. God's holy mountain is in the center and on that mountain God's spirit pervades. But in order for that presence and power to move out to the people, there must be a leader who embodies the spirit of reconciliation and peace. Karl Barth says the view of predatorship reigning on the sixth day of creation -- human beings that are tempted to go back to the state of the animals and perform like animals, are being beckoned, according to him to the seventh day--which is where God lives, God rests, and God sustains. And Barth says that God is inviting us to come and live in the seventh day and get out of the sixth day where the animals rule. In order to become fully human, we must be in the constant presence of a loving God.

We consider ourselves in this church to be a ministry of grace, which means that we commit ourselves to reverse the predatorial styles that can be found in business, church, and government. We say "No," to that pattern, because we believe that the Messiah has said, "No," and the Messiah represents a pattern of peace that helps people who would normally be predatorial connect to each other in grace. The demand-and-command control intimidation patterns must give way, by grace, to healing, help, and patience. Sto assertiveness and truthfulness, but gracefulness as it ties them together. Reconciliation and forgiveness--not vendetta--must be the pattern that rules where the people of God lead.

What does it take for a wolf to lie down with a lamb? It means that humanity must let go of its fear and aggression. The wolf gives up

the power to devour. And the lamb says, "No," to being devoured. Mutual respect, honor, and value prevail among all. The appetite that gets to the deepest hungers of our humanity is assuaged, not because we are able to chew on one another, but because God is so powerfully present to give us a sense of satisfaction in the inner core of our being.

Mary's Magnificat brings that image of balance of power with the wonderful poetic words that God will scatter the proud through the Messiah, he will bring down the powerful and lift up the lowly and fill the hungry and send the rich away empty. There is a balancing of who has what, and how people use it.

In Isaiah's devastation metaphor, the forests are literally cut down by the axes of predators. But we are also given the illustration of the stump that's left, from which a little shoot appears, which is the line of Jesse. And from that shoot comes the Messiah. That shoot brings a leader into this world that literally embodies the living God. That leader will carry the spirit of Yahweh. That leader will bring the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, in counsel and might. He will be called the Mighty God, the Wonderful Counselor, and the Prince of Peace. That leader will delight in God's presence, and he beckons us to become leaders who do likewise. If we live into that image, we become a church of leaders who literally model our lives after Jesus the Christ.

My oldest brother modeled that life for me in a rather unusual way. He brought home the meaning of the wolf being with the lamb, but it was about me and spiders. One morning at about the age of eight, I got up along with my brother Wendel. We were getting ready for school, I put on my coat and put my arm through but as soon as I did I felt that silky mesh, and lo and behold there was a big black thing that rolled out of my sleeve and onto my arm, and I went crazy. Even in those days, I was a good-sized kid and I was uncontrollable for several minutes. A black widow had made its web in my sleeve. My brother calmed me, said "It's okay, the spiders gone, where is it, see that black spot on the wall. That's where you threw it, and it's still there." In a great paradox of history, my brother went on to become a specialist in spiders. An arachnologist who is internationally known, he is an official, real spiderman. He would often have tarantulas in the house, and he would teach me to be at peace with them, which is a frightening thing for me. He would take these tarantulas and spiders into schools where he would teach children to be at peace with them, how to treat them and call them God's wonderful, little creatures. Leadership. I have to admit, I still don't have that same sense of safety that he does around spiders.

The presence of Yahweh in a person's life develops leadership that brings Yahweh into other people's lives; who brings reconciliation into other people's lives; who brings the ability to understand the defensive and aggressive patterns in life and to make peace with them and not perpetuate them. The wisdom leads to leadership that is full of reconciliation. The administration of justice leads to cared-for people who are weak and unable to care for themselves, because we know that God's heart is with them.

Edwin Freedman in his books, *Generation to Generation* and *The Loss of Nerve*, talks about a kind of leadership that will bring such peace. It is an assertive leadership that speaks the truth in gracious love. It is a leadership that will not allow someone to undermine them. It's like Jesus -- it is not a leader who is passive or aggressive, it is a leader who understands how to bring balance. It is not given to a kind of primitive reactivity according to brain stem, but is able to live into the higher functions of one's spiritual reality, to be assertive and directive, self-defined, self-aware, self-confident, and self-initiated. Only a person who is embodied by the presence of God on the seventh day can become such a leader. We saw glimpses of that in the movie, "Seabiscuit." An abused horse becomes calmed, healed, and well-trained. A destitute jockey is reclaimed and adopted into a family. A broken, depressed father has new life with a new wife and a new family. A wandering, alienated trainer becomes the leader who takes them all to where the predator no longer reigns. Predators don't win; the big beautiful horse doesn't win. God provides a miracle that the weak will be lifted up.

We need leadership today that doesn't act out the Darwinian pattern of survival of the fittest. We need leadership today that allows solutions to conflicts that are not about sharks biting off the heads of teddy bears because they are so committed to getting the job done that they don't care about people. We need leaders who are wise like owls, wise as serpents and gentle as doves, as Jesus said. For God's leadership, modeled after Messiah, will change organizations. We will be able to see the visible kingdom of God here in the church, in political circles, businesses, and baseball teams, because leaders are there to bring assertive, gracious presence to lead people to balance. There will be justice to the poor because somebody cares and somebody is able to help others learn how to care.

The Messianic power is that we will be changed. As we live in God's presence, as follow Jesus the Christ. With Yahweh at the center, with the rippling effect permeating us and moving us to be leaders in the places where we live, this world can be changed, family by family, business by business, church by church, and government by government. But we need to follow the core leader...the Messiah...the Christ, and be pervaded by the presence of the spirit of God, so that we are not predators and prey. In Jesus Christ, the future is now.

Amen.