

## **Peaceable Kingdom**

### **Isaiah 11:6-9**

At the back of our house, the church parsonage,  
there's a bay window  
that looks out on a flagstone patio.

It's quite lovely – designed, I'm sure, so that occupants of the house  
could sit at that bay window of an evening  
sipping martinis and gazing out on a perfect garden  
as the sun dips below the horizon.

So, David and I aren't really martini people  
and there's not so much of a perfect garden to gaze out on,  
but it is a lot of fun to look out the bay window of an evening –  
and this is why:

Every night as the sun goes down,  
the menagerie comes out.

The zoo, I should say.

You've heard David talk about how he loves to feed squirrels –  
and this he does, every morning –

he takes great scoops of nuts and seeds and scatters them across the patio like a farmer  
sowing his field.

And the squirrels and the birds eat as much as their little tummies can hold.

But there are always leftovers,  
and there are a lot of animals out there that know that.

Because each evening,  
as darkness descends,  
gazing out the window you will see

Pokey the Possum,

Rocky Raccoon and his siblings,

Sydney the Skunk, who, we're pretty sure, lives under the front porch,  
and the occasional deer on the patio too.

What's quite remarkable is that they all get along famously.

Sydney looks on with admiration as Rocky scrambles up the birdfeeder to get the last  
bits of suet,

Pokey Possum wanders around oblivious and content.

Peaceable kingdom at the Parsonage,

we call it.  
Peaceable Kingdom.

That's what that passage from Isaiah is known as,  
the scripture that Joel just read to you.

Over the centuries, it's come to be known as Isaiah's Peaceable Kingdom.  
It's Isaiah's poetic imagining of a time when all creation knows peace,  
*all* creation:

The wolf shall live with the lamb, Isaiah dreams,  
the leopard shall lie down with the goat,  
the calf and the lion together,  
The cow and the bear shall graze,  
their young shall lie down together;  
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

It's a beautiful image,  
one that people have always loved.

Artists in particular have been drawn to it,  
taking great delight in painting canvasses full of all sorts of animals happily hanging  
out together in the peaceable kingdom --  
there are actually a couple Peaceable Kingdom paintings just up the road at the Yale Art  
Gallery.

But David and I, we get our own Peaceable Kingdom on the patio every evening.  
No cows and bears grazing together yet, which is probably just as well,  
but in our parsonage,  
the skunk and the raccoon and the possum shall indeed dwell happily together.

Truth is, of course, that Isaiah the prophet wasn't really writing this so much about  
animals,

he would not necessarily have been interested in our skunks and raccoons;  
I don't even know that he was much of an animal lover,  
although he may have been.

He wasn't writing about lions and lambs together just to be whimsical and poetic,  
although poetic it is.

Isaiah's imaginative description of enemy animals getting along  
was his poetic way to talk about the world around him,  
to talk about **us**.

Imagine, he was saying,

a world so full of peace that peace permeates every aspect of creation.

Imagine a world of such coexistence

that even the animals live in harmony with one another.

And he ends his description with these powerful words:

*No one will hurt or destroy ...*

*for the earth will be full of the knowledge of God*

*as the waters cover the sea.*

This is actually a passage that we traditionally read in Advent.

Round about December 10<sup>th</sup> of this year, you'll hear this passage again.

In those weeks before we celebrate Christ's birth,

we listen to Isaiah dream his dream of a world yet to be,

and then we remember together that Jesus was born to bring that world into existence.

This is an Advent passage,

a passage full of longing and hope and imagining

and dreaming and visioning.

So every December we read it here in church, on an Advent Sunday.

And on the Monday night following, I do something with the Confirmation class to get them thinking about it.

I read the passage for them again,

Isaiah's dream of a peaceful world yet to be.

And then, sitting right here in the Sanctuary,

I put a song on over the loudspeakers.

It's the song that our Junior Choir sang for us [earlier][in the earlier service].

*Imagine*, by John Lennon.

*Imagine all the people living life in peace ...*

*You may say I'm a dreamer*

*But I'm not the only one*

*I hope some day you'll join us*

*And the world will live as one*

And then I say to the kids –

you've just heard the voice of a prophet from almost three thousand years ago,  
dreaming of peace –

and you've heard the voice of a prophetic *artist* from almost 50 years ago now –  
dreaming of peace.

And together we talk about what it would take to move from the world as it is now  
to the world as Isaiah dreamed it,  
as John Lennon imagined it.

What would need to change, I ask them?  
And the Confirmands sit and think for a moment,  
think about what it would take to create a true peaceable kingdom.  
“People not being greedy”, someone says.  
“No more bullying,” says someone else.  
“Making sure nobody is hungry,” says someone.  
And together, we dream our own dream,  
we imagine our own vision  
of the world that God calls us to,  
of the world Jesus came to lead us to.

This past week, my friend and long time youth group advisor Kathy Thackaberry  
brought me a poem that her granddaughter Ellie, 11 years old,  
had written.

I’ve known Ellie since she was born; her dad was in SPF when I came to this church.  
And what Ellie wrote was her own vision of that peaceable kingdom.

I shared it with our SPF youth group as our devotion that night.

Ellie’s got a little Isaiah in her, a little John Lennon.

The poem’s called simply “peace and war.”

*Peace, wrote Ellie, is when two enemies sit side by side on a bench, and work things  
out, and create a beautiful thing ...*

*War is when two enemies sit side by side on a bench, and fight, spreading horror.*

*Peace is when all the kids at school are together, assisting each other, and creating  
more beauty in each other’s lives ...*

*War is when the kids at school sit in groups, separated by culture, race, and gender.*

And then she writes,

*Peace is a soccer field, where everybody is equal and the only thing that matters in the  
moment is fun. ....*

*Peace might be around the corner soon. You never know.*

You may say I’m a dream, said John Lennon, but I’m not the only one.  
Nor was Isaiah the only one, nor Ellie.

And what we are called to be, here in this church on the hill,  
is dreamers just like that.

Dreamers with our feet planted on the ground,  
realists still,  
but dreamers who see a vision of what could be,  
and hear Christ calling us towards it.  
And commit ourselves to working for it.

There's just one line in the Lennon song that always pains me when I hear it.  
One line in *Imagine* that grieves me.

John Lennon sang  
*Imagine no religion – I wonder if you can-  
nothing to kill or die for – a brotherhood of man.*

What grieves me always, when I hear that line,  
is that there is painful truth in it –  
Religion, as we have often constructed it to be,  
has made enemies of people who were brothers and sisters,  
built walls instead of bridges.  
It's been something to kill or die for, far too often.

But it doesn't have to be that way.  
We here at this church know that religion doesn't have to be that way –  
we know that faith in the God of Love  
should lead us toward that "brotherhood of man", that sisterhood of humanity, not  
away from it –

And on Friday evening, David and I were reminded of that.  
On Friday evening (*as David mentioned earlier*),  
we were gathered in B'nai Israel synagogue,  
hundreds of us together,  
to honor our friend Rabbi Jim Prosnit.  
And this is who was gathered there:  
everybody.  
Jews and Muslims and Catholics and Protestants,  
Black and brown and white, old and young,

young women rabbis and women pastors of a certain age,  
 an Imam and the Jesuit president of Fairfield University.  
 We were celebrating a man whose entire career has been devoted to bringing us  
 together,  
 and he *has*, my friend Jim has –  
 he has gathered us together to work together, to learn together, to laugh together.  
 And on Friday night we said thank you.  
 I was honored to give a final blessing,  
 along with my friend Imam Nasif Muhammad, and Father Gerry Blaszczak of Fairfield  
 U.  
 And each of us when we stood began with the words that had been spoken to each of us  
 on entering:  
 Shabbat Shalom,  
 which means not just ‘Happy Sabbath to you,’  
 but ‘Peaceful Sabbath’. Shabbat Shalom.  
 Shabbat Shalom, said the Protestant, and the Catholic, and the Jew and the Muslim.  
 And it was, in that moment, in that place, the way the world was created to be.

That’s the world we are called to work toward,  
 each one of us.  
 The Peaceable Kingdom of God.  
 A world in which the lion lies down with the lamb.  
 A world as full of love as the waters covering the sea.  
 A world at peace.

Oh, I know, I know.  
 It’s daunting.  
 I know, I do know,  
 that this is a dream of the poets,  
 an imagining of the prophets.  
 But visions are there to lead us on –  
 Because knowing what is yet to be, what is coming,  
 is what guides our footsteps on the way.

My friend Jim, whom we celebrated,  
 spends each day working for the healing of the world,  
*tikkun olam*. The repair of the world.

And on Friday, as he urged us toward the true peaceable kingdom,  
he said this, these words from the Mishnah:

*You are not obligated to complete the work...  
but neither are you free to desist from it.*

*You are not obligated to complete the work,  
but neither are you free to desist from it.*

Each one of us is called to the work of peace.  
Each one of us called to work toward the healing of the world.

You may say we're the dreamers, but we're not the only ones.  
Together we live into the vision painted for us  
by the Creator of Love,  
by the Artist whose dream we dream.  
Amen.