

Church of the Crossroads
Second Sunday of Advent
December 9, 2007
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GATHERING AROUND A VISION

Isaiah 11:1–10

This morning, rather than focusing on John the Baptist's cry in the wilderness, as filled as it is with warning and judgment and fire, I am choosing instead to be attentive to the prophet Isaiah's kinder, gentler apocalyptic vision of the peaceful kingdom.

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 shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain;
for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of God
as the waters cover the sea. —Isa 11:6–9

This vision, by the way, was announced in the midst of a troubled world among a people living under Assyrian occupation in the 7th century BCE. Incredible!

In the troubled time in which he lived, Isaiah attached his vision of the peaceful kingdom to the coming of the Messiah, from the “root of Jesse,” who would not make decisions on hearsay or superficial seeing, but who would be endowed with the spirit of wisdom and a capacity to understand. This Messiah, with righteousness, will “judge the poor and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.” He shall abstain from violence but will overcome the wicked with the words of his lips and the breath of his lips.

In linking the vision of the peaceable kingdom to the “root of Jesse,” the prophet frames his apocalyptic vision in a distinctively *Jewish context*.

Later, Christians took over the vision and related it to the life and ministry of Jesus, but originally the vision had a distinctive Jewish flavor.

What has interested me recently is how the vision itself can be lifted from its contexts, whether Jewish or Christian, and then to assume a universal quality. Humanists can own the vision for themselves. So can thoroughly secular people. One can well imagine a thoroughly secular human being signing his name to a Hallmark card picturing a wolf and a lamb and a cow and a bear and a lion and a calf lying down together or feeding beside one another. The most secular of people are able to own the vision for themselves.

For underneath all the violence and war-making and enmity and greed to be found in our world, most human beings, whether religious or not, whether Christian or Jewish or Muslim or Hindu, desire a world at peace and unafraid, the kind of world I gaze upon as I sit quietly on the back porch of our house. It is a world that includes our wonderful next door neighbor playing with his son in the back yard of his house. It is also a world that includes the natural world as does Isaiah's vision—ducks swimming in the stream, a shama thrush singing in the tree, blossoming and fruited trees—this is the kind of world we desire. And I don't have to be a Christian to desire it.

The things that make for peace? We could mention justice. Without an equal sharing of the things of the earth, there can be no peace. We could mention the rejection of violence. Or, as someone shared with me this week, we could mention the need to nurture within ourselves a feminine perspective upon the world. We could mention the practice of compassion, forgiveness, and reconciliation. All of these are necessary if we want to approach Isaiah's vision of the peaceable kingdom.

Today, however, I do not want to concentrate on these things that make for peace. Rather, I wish to speak of *belief*, not belief as “intellectual assent,” but belief traced to its Old English meaning. The root word in the word “belief” is the Old English word *leif*—love. What I believe, then, is what I love, what I hold dear. I therefore *believe* in Isaiah's vision. I hold it dear to my heart. And probably my neighbor does also, even though he never enters the doors of a church.

The problem is that I never talk with my neighbor about these things. We chat about his son or how high the stream came up in the recent rain. He

even knows that I am the pastor of Church of the Crossroads. But we never share anything about what we believe. And if we did, we would probably simply smile at each other as if to say, “That’s good.” This is the way it is in American culture.

In a recent article in *Harper’s Magazine* called “Hot Air Gods,”¹ Curtis White observes that religious belief in our culture is always framed as *individual* belief. He makes three characteristic about individual belief. When I say that “This is my belief,” I imply that I have a right to my belief. Secondly, I expect that you ought to respect my belief, even if my belief does not make any sense to you. Third, my belief does not have to make sense to carry legitimacy. For you to respect my belief, I only have to be sincere. Every belief, then, if held sincerely, is legitimate.

We are very reluctant in our culture to question the belief of another person, just as that other person will seldom question beliefs that we hold. The spiritual life of our culture, then, consists of individually held beliefs that are seldom questioned.

Curtis White argues, convincingly, in my estimation, that our economic system prefers to have it this way. As long as beliefs remain individual beliefs, then it will be unlikely that our economic system will be questioned from an ethical, religious, point of view. For that to happen, our individual beliefs would have to be transformed into a commonly held belief. Our individual narratives would have to come together and become a meta-narrative, a story larger than my own individual stories.

Just imagine—the Christian, the Jew, the Muslim, the humanist, the secularist all believing the vision of the wolf lying down with the lamb, and coming together around the vision. What power the vision would then have! Of course, for that to happen, we would have to share our beliefs with one another and come to a commonly held belief in the vision of the peaceful kingdom. I would have to speak with my neighbor, and my neighbor with me. Curtis White calls this the process of translation. If we were serious about communicating our beliefs with one another, beliefs that make no sense would soon fall by the wayside, and beliefs such as the belief in Isaiah’s vision of the peaceful kingdom would thrive in our culture.

¹ Curtis White, “Hot Air Gods,” *Harper’s*, December 2007

Isaiah's vision speaks of a *culture of life* and a rejection of the *culture of death*. In Isaiah's vision, everything lives in harmony and peace. All live without fear and in safety. The child even plays over the hold of the asp, and the weaned child puts its hand on the adder's den. None hurt or destroy. The earth itself is at peace.

It is surely possible for human beings from differing religious and humanist traditions to come together around such a vision. The good news is that this is in truth happening. One of the most remarkable and praise-worthy developments of this past year is the way in which evangelical Christians are now more and more committed to what they are calling *creation care*. All of a sudden, almost overnight, evangelical Christians find themselves aligned with others who are also committed to a culture of life through a responsible stewardship of the earth, including other Christians, Jews, environmentalists, pantheists, members of the Sierra club, just to name a few. How remarkable! This is a tribute to the validity of the process of translation. All of a sudden, people are truly listening to each other and learning from each other! This does not mean that Christians must lose their distinctiveness or pantheists theirs. This doesn't mean that we are going to become the same. How dull that would be. It does mean, however, that if there is to be any change in the world we are going to have to engage one another at a deeper level of meaning, from the depths of our belief, from those values and commitments we hold dear in our hearts.

Another way to put it is to say that Isaiah's vision, originally created in a Jewish context, has the capacity to become a universal vision. Those who, in the name of the Market God of economic capitalism, continue to destroy the earth just in order to make a profit, beware! And those who, in the name of the Empire, continue to wage war and are beholden to a culture of death, beware! As long as evangelical Christians continue to share their commitment to a culture of life with environmentalists and pantheists, as long as Church of the Crossroads continues to work with those who frequent the Revolution Book Store and those who belong to Code Pink and the World Cannot Wait, and those who support the witness of Ehren Watada, and Buddhists and Jews and Muslims who are forming the Interfaith Power and Light, and all who are working so tirelessly to reverse the practices that are leading to global warming, who knows what might happen! The world, by the grace of God, just might take a step closer to that vision first announced by the prophet so long ago. Can it happen? *I believe it can. More importantly, we believe it can. Amen.*