

**Preacher:** Tim Hollenberg-Duffey

**Scripture:** Isaiah 11:6-9

“A zookeeper allegedly discovered the key to the peaceable kingdom. In the same cage he kept a lion and a lamb. Someone asked him how he did it. He said, ‘Oh, I just put in a fresh lamb each morning.’”

The image of the peaceable kingdom as depicted in Isaiah 11 is compelling. I can remember as a kid, my parents had a picture hanging in our home of the peaceable Kingdom, a place where wolves and lambs live together, a place where leopards and goats or lions and calves walk side by side, a place where children can put their hand in a viper's den and not be bit. The picture was painted as if for a child's room—serene, pastel, comforting. What a world, a perfect world of true peace.

This is a world where predator and prey come together. However, for this to work and not end up like the lion and lamb in that opening joke, the lion or wolf or leopard or bear must change its nature. The animal must become something else and something new: no longer carnivore's, no longer inclined like a viper to attack the intruder of their den. Instincts shift. This is a circle of life, ecosystem-altering stuff.

For the exiled Israelites, this image might translate to Israelites living in community with the Assyrians. Remember how much Jonah hated those Assyrians from Nineveh last week. Or it might look like Judeans living amidst Babylonians who'd just conquered their land. This is hard stuff to imagine.

I believe that Isaiah's prophecy might be our first glimpses into theology about the Kingdom of God. The peaceable kingdom is a first look into Kingdom Theology. I'll explain more in a moment about what that means. But first I want us to dwell in the earlier section of Isaiah 11. I told my Sunday School class and probably many of you talked about this today, but Isaiah presents the first most complete image of the future Messiah. As Christians, we know the Messiah as Jesus and we frequently read this prophetic text in the advent season as we long for his coming to be with us in flesh. Isaiah prophesies of a day of hope when out of the stump of Jesse—that seemingly dead Davidic kingly line, a shoot will spring out, a new sign of hope. And this new shoot is a new King who rules with righteousness, spiritual wisdom, and great justice. The Messiah presents new hope for the people of Israel and Judah. Jesus is a new hope, but this Messiah also comes with a new Kingdom where the very nature of creatures is transformed so that the creation can live together.

This shift in the book of Isaiah to a Messianic Kingdom of God perspective is incredibly new for his audience. Think with me for a moment about how the Israelites imagined their kingdom. From the moment of Father Abraham's call to leave his homeland, the ideal kingdom was inextricably connected to the Holy Land, that promised a land flowing with milk and honey. The ideal kingdom was a place that those enslaved Israelites in Egypt could hardly imagine reaching, but eventually they did occupy this perfect God-given place. But they discovered that simply being in this place did not mean they've reached that ideal kingdom—they struggled, they waged war, they endured civil war and awful unrighteous kings. Attainment of the ideal kingdom did not equate to occupying this place at all. And yet, this land was their dream, so much so that upon the kingdoms of Israel and Judah being destroyed, their writings reflected a dreaming of the day they may return to that marvelous land flowing with milk and honey, a place where they might worship the Lord at his temple in Jerusalem. Many of the other prophets

prophesied about that day and the people did eventually return to the land and rebuild and worship, but that kingdom was far from perfect.

Isaiah is saying something different, his prophecy of the Messiah and his Kingdom is wholly new, for he is imagining the Kingdom of God which is not so much tied to one specific land and one specific people, but rather to all who would worship the Lord, and his place is all creation. Theology is changing. For us as Christians, we believe Jesus is our Messiah and his arrival in flesh at Christmas was the inauguration of his reign over the Kingdom of God. This Kingdom will not become fully realized until he returns; but until that day, as I have said in many sermons, we get a preview of the Kingdom of God in glimpses and fragments of its glory breaking in.

Much debate has been had about how much of this in-breaking is ours to do. Some people say when they read Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew that these radical ethics are reserved for the Kingdom. That until the Kingdom comes fully, we can't live or shouldn't attempt to live in such a radical way. I would disagree; this is more complicated than that. The ethics of the kingdom of God which include peace, love, mercy, godliness—Jesus wants us to be putting hands and feet on those things now, while the kingdom is still in this in-between time. However, we do this fully knowing that this image of the Peaceable Kingdom is not yet realized. Wolves and lambs are not yet living together in safety.

Jesus speaks to this also in the gospels. In Matthew's gospel, the wolf becomes the central metaphor for false prophets, those people that would seek to steer Christ's children away from the flock. Jesus wants us to beware that such wolves exist in our world and that for the people of God, we must be shrewd as vipers, wise in our discernment and protection, and innocent as doves, not getting drawn in to damaging situations. As the Brethren have said for centuries, this must be because the Kingdom is here and not yet.

But if Isaiah's foretold Kingdom of God is not yet here, then how far off is it? This is the burdensome question. For we all long for a day of true peace.

Such a question has made some Christians place the Kingdom of God in such an other-kind of dimension that it is achievable only after death. The Kingdom of Heaven is used synonymously in the Gospels to refer to the Kingdom of God, but some folks had used it to move these kingdom ideals beyond our reality. And I don't think that's our answer.

The fact that we are heaven bound doesn't get us out of righteous living now. Lionel Basney tells this story about our citizenship in heaven: "A couple of election days ago, I drove past the fine, vital, Roman Catholic church in the next town, and there were two signs out in front. One was the church marquee; the other was a cardboard sign on a short wooden stick, indicating with an arrow that the parish house was being used as a polling place. The marquee read: 'Our citizenship is in heaven.' The cardboard sign read: 'Vote here.' The two signs and their apparent paradox seemed to me to get things just about right. Here is the only place where citizens of heaven can vote. Your heavenly citizenship is only as good, practically, as your earthly franchise. On the other hand, you will probably vote wrongly--irresponsibly, selfishly—" <sup>1</sup> As we tell inquiring members in the Church of the Brethren that part of our heritage is a non-participation in some civic endeavors like voting, because the old Brethren believed it was a participation in an impure system—we should hold this view in tension with these two signs. Yes, our citizenship is in heaven, but until that day, we might choose to vote, and we will definitely labor for kingdom values although we know we'll do it wrong and selfishly.

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<sup>1</sup>Lionel Basney, *An Earth-Careful Way of Life* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 161.

The Bible makes it clear to me that God wishes to restore this world, and that at some point on some day that none of us can predict, that Kingdom will come. In the meantime, there's a good deal of pain. Ann Weems captures this mean time well. In her poem "Reaching for Rainbows," she writes,

I keep reaching for the rainbows ...  
Thinking one ... morning ...  
The hungry [will be] fed,  
The dying held,  
The maimed walking,  
The angry stroked,  
The violent calmed,  
The oppressed freed,  
The oppressors changed,  
And every tear wiped away ...<sup>2</sup>

Brothers and Sisters, I don't know much more than this longing and, therefore, have little to tell you about when. But I know that it will be good and perfect, that the burdens and tensions of present time will be lifted and eased. It is for such a world like this that I attempt to strive for now, knowing that the perfection of our Messiah and his Kingdom is reserved for his initiative. Until that day, we stumble, we sin, we try and try to pursue righteousness and redemption, knowing full well, like our Israelite ancestors, we always fall short. God, be merciful unto us your children until your Kingdom comes. Come Lord Jesus, assume your throne and reign.

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<sup>2</sup>Ann Weems, *Reaching for Rainbows: Resources for Creative Worship* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), 15.