

DARE TO HOPE (Peaceable Kingdom – Isaiah 11:1-9) A2A – 2007

The lyrics for the beautiful old 15th century carol we just sang, “Lo, How a Rose E’re Blooming” are based on the text we read and have been talking about – Isaiah 11. We’re invited to sing about and to imagine this beautiful, bright red rose that manages somehow to bloom “amid the cold of winter, when half spent was the night.” Isaiah 11 mentions a shoot or branch that springs forth from a stump – the stump representing the real political condition of the lineage of Jesse at the time; the people of Judah had just been overrun by the mighty Assyrian Empire, and most of the people had been taken away by force into exile, or if handicapped, elderly, or ill, had been left behind, helplessly stranded without care giving companions and loved ones. Times were horrible for the people of Jesse’s lineage – perhaps more so than we can even imagine.

A native Northwesterner might more cheerily want to picture a splendid old-growth cedar, with its strong towering bulk attached to beautiful, high, swaying, sun-greeting green parts. But then, in a tiny fraction of the time it took to become that majestic giant of a tree at the height of its grandeur, a chain saw cuts it down; loggers carry its trunk away, leaving behind green scraps in piles to be burned. The tree’s roots, suddenly cut off from its trunk, its trunk cut off from its branches, like arms and legs severed, like a child taken away from her parent.

‘Amid the cold of winter, when half spent was the night’, have you ever worried you might become like that cut off stump? Maybe you’ve found yourself asking questions, anxious and awful questions such as these: “Will I ever shake this seemingly unshakable feeling of hopelessness regarding the state of the world, and my own place in it?” “Will I be able to pay off all my debts and find a job that I really love? Will that job adequately provide FOR the ones I love?” “What will I do if I lose my job?” “Will I ever get over this lingering illness, this cloud of confusion, this bodily pain?” “Will this lump turn out benign?” “Will I ever get free of that domineering, abusive, or negligent person in my life who STILL haunts all my waking dreams, and seems to make me so nervous and afraid?” “Will I ever get free of a god of wrath so I can fully embrace the God of forgiveness and grace?” “Will earthly companions alleviate my loneliness; will somebody be beside me to touch and accompany me all my days?” “Will I ever conclude that peace will come, should I let it begin with me?” Yes! Try believing it. Yes, yes, yes and more yeses. Advent people, dare to hope!

That has to be, amid midnight fear, discouragement, and despair, what that impossibly beautiful full-blooming rose is meant to represent: Hope – blooming in our hearts, in the middle of the night in winter, no less. A rose at the end of a tiny shoot that took off – Ahah! – we thought it was a dead stump! I call that resurrection hope. It’s the kind that can resonate mightily for cut off, cold or hurting people of any persuasion, for people of any and every nation and faith tradition, at those very times at which all would otherwise seem absolutely hopeless. The impossible WILL take a little while, but keep believing in it. “Yes, we shall overcome.” We will not remain disappointed forever. “DARE TO HOPE!” The hymn and the text and the whole meaning of the season proclaim.

“Way back in the 12th Century, St. Hildegard of Bingen grabbed hold of the seemingly-impossible tenacious dream of green peace rose-blooming hope when she wrote of the *veriditas*, or the greening power of God. God in Christ brings “lush greenness” to “shriveled and wilted” humanity, she announced to the world. This God of green hope permeates today’s Isaiah text, and the whole spirit of the Advent season.” So it is that we “prepare the way” with dreams of peace and hope for a greener world. The “shoot of Jesse” yet takes root in the stump of all that appears to be long dead and gone. Dare to hope! Have faith in the yet-to-be-born.

"But how?" some of us may still be asking. The evidence at hand working against hope seems so definitive – both in our own personal lives, and in the wider world. Nine nations in the world today have enough nuclear weapons to destroy whole other nations, and given humanity's terrible historic retaliatory tendencies, could destroy the entire planet. And since nuclear weapons haven't actually been used in warfare since Hiroshima and Nagasaki, many have forgotten or grown weary thinking about them. Meanwhile, the catastrophic effects of global warming and unsound environmental standards are becoming more and more obvious every day.

I do not believe we should be in a state of denial regarding what's going on in the world. Many of you know that my sermons often make reference to tough sociopolitical and economic realities. But I do so because in my experience, genuine hope only takes hold WHEN it's rooted in reality! And yet we mustn't mistake everything we read or hear about AS reality! As the prophet tells of it in Isaiah 11, "He shall not judge by what his eyes alone see, or decide by what his ears alone hear," In other words, don't be swayed by mere appearance.

The images you see in your rearview mirror may appear to be closer than they actually are. Is there a war going on inside of us too? Have the lion and the lamb inside our own selves not laid down yet together, our inner child not yet leading them, with none being afraid? When and where exactly, is it true inside our own selves that "all is calm, all is bright?" An anxious, fear-based take on our life circumstances will not only be miserable – it will also be inaccurate. Openness to the deeper truths leaves room for the imagination too. For picturing praiseworthy possibilities. For looking in all the nooks and crannies of our lives for signs of the peaceable reign of God, where "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."

So many of our best Biblical stories took shape during the worst of times, and spoke to us of the best of times. They are stories of hope that sing imaginatively. Sometimes, as with so many of the Psalms, they sing the blues, longing to transcend their own often-gloomy personal and sociopolitical circumstances. But sing and hope they still do, creatively imagining ways to set captives of every sort free, to play with snakes and lay down with lions. We can do no less. Dare to imagine possibilities we've been told are impossible. I challenge each of you to spend at least five minutes each day throughout the remainder of the Advent season picturing something beautiful you've been told is impossible.

What we're looking for are signs of the scene that the rest of the Isaiah 11 text describes in detail. It's what the 18th century Quaker artist Edward Hicks portrayed in his famous painting, *The Peaceable Kingdom*. In it, one sees predator and prey, the wolf and the lamb, the cow and the bear, the lion, the snake, and the little child, all getting along just splendidly. Those who have swam with the dolphins (or have always wanted to) may or may not also want to play around with snakes, or take a nap on the belly of a lion, but can certainly appreciate the holy longings for peaceful connectedness with all of creation which are imaged in such scenes. If this is heaven, heaven is THIS world at peace, creature and creation-friendly, wholly transformed. Sure it takes, at first, a whole LOT of poetic imagination to go there, but please don't ever let a mere cataloguing of gloomy presumed facts get in the way of a greater truth. Envision the peaceable kingdom! What possible harm than that do you? The impossible will take a little while, yes. But dare to hope, dare to hope. Let it ooze into all your pores until hope is more real than anything else.

Then from this day forward, may the lion and the lamb lay down peaceably, in the wider world as well as deep within your very being. For you, and for our world, may there be

comfort and joy, comfort and joy, all is calm, all is bright, and none shall be afraid. Believe it. Amen.