

I was visiting my friend Sherri in Philadelphia one time when it became clear very quickly that the plans that we had for the day were going to change when her twin niece and nephew were added into the mix.

Knowing that they would be less than interested in brunch at the latest boutique gastro pub, we quickly abandoned our plans and changed course.

Sherri is an animal lover. When she's not busy with her day job as a Presbyterian Minister, she volunteers at local animal rehab facilities. She has handled raptors and seals and other things that I only view through windows or on screens. I sort of limit it to dogs and cats myself, and the occasional odd bird. Seriously, when the preschool had reptile day last fall I declined to come by the church until it was declared a snake-free zone.

So of course I kept my lips buttoned when Sherri and her brother determined that the Philadelphia Zoo would be a great way to keep the children occupied and entertained. The truth is, though, I don't really like zoos. I don't like seeing animals removed from the wild. Frankly, I have a hard time even reconciling myself with crating my dogs when I'm not home, and that is done for the good of greater Decatur.

I did a good job of keep my mouth shut until we got to the large cats and the lion came out onto a bluff overlooking the lionesses and let out an anemic sounding roar.

"Oh, you king of beasts," I said, "To what an ignominious place you've come."

Sherri turned to me and said, "Speaking of beasts, you might want to climb down off that high horse before you fall. That lion was born in captivity. He would last one week on

the savannah. If he's going to live, this is where it's going to be. Zoos aren't like they were in the old days, this is an educational institution."

Of course, she's right.

A few years later we were in Scotland, just north of Oban, on our way to Iona where I was going to spend some time doing nothing and she was going to do some ongoing research into the place of wildlife in Celtic Spirituality, and she told me, "There's a Sea Lion Sanctuary on the way, I'd really like to stop and see what they're doing."

So again my anti-zoo sentiment reared its head. "Sherri, I don't really want to look at a bunch of poor sea lions swimming around in circles in some tepid puddle for the amusement of anyone who happened to pull off the motorway."

And again I was foiled, "It's a rescue sanctuary," she said, "the injured pups are brought here and fed until they come up to weight and then they are released back into the wild. They've been tracking them for years and they have a ninety percent success rate. It's not a zoo. If anything, it's a new kind of zoo."

I thought about that this week as I considered Isaiah's zoo because in each instance the reality was completely different from what I expected.

That is the heart of Isaiah's vision – that nothing is as it seems. Nothing is the way we expect it to be.

That is, of course, the magic of Isaiah's vision – that nothing is as we expect it to be.

Lions and lambs don't hang out together. Not for long, at least. Same with Leopards and kids – you *can* put them together but expect some nice gloves at the end of the day.

I've never seen a grazing bear.

And we all know where I am when there are snakes in the building.

Maybe you remember that wonderful Edward Hicks folk painting that hangs in the national gallery... it's called *The Peaceable Kingdom*, and it is this text come to life... there is a possum like-bear hanging out next to a cow gnawing on some straw, there is another cow next to a regal, restrained, elegantly serene lion, and in the midst is a toddler. We don't put toddlers in the middle of the zoo enclosures either, come to think of it. The whole thing looks like a farce.

Isaiah's listeners would have thought it was farcical too.

Most of us think of prophecy and assume that it is a prognostication – a looking ahead to some sort of distant future – we hear Isaiah and we think of Jesus, who of course, is many hundreds of years into the future from when Isaiah was preaching.

The reality is, though, that Isaiah was preaching a present word for a present reality.

Whatever we think that Isaiah has to say about Jesus, he starts with a word to his people about their situation right then.

It is useful to think of Isaiah as having about three periods for what he had to say.

There's *before the invasion*, *during the invasion*, and *after the invasion*. These three periods spread over a long period of time, and through it all, people writing under the guise of Isaiah bring a word from God.

First it is a word of warning.

It is long and verbose but at its heart it is quite a simple warning to the people: *if you stay on this path, there will be consequences*.

The path of course is placing their trust, as a people, elsewhere from God.

Then it is a word of resignation: *the consequences have come; now we are living with them*.

And finally, it is a word of promise: *God will return us to our homes. This time in exile will not last forever.*

What I find so wonderful about Isaiah, though, is this: in every age of the prophecy, whether it is warning, or resignation, or even in the end looking to an eventual promise, there remains throughout the element of *hope*.

Our reading this morning, the absurd vision of the peaceable kingdom wherein logic is stood on its head with unpredictable animal behavior, is just such a word of hope.

It begins simply enough. A root shall come out of the stump of Jesse...

In the scenes before we read this, Isaiah warns of the utter deforestation of Israel. All that is living will be cut down, thrown as fuel into the fire.

If you stay on this path, there will be consequences, and they will be bad, is the warning of Isaiah.

But... there is hope, even in hopeless circumstances.

Even in the midst of rampant destruction and the promise of more to come, there is a line that hearkens back to better days.

A root shall come out of the stump of Jesse.

David was Jesse's son.

David was Israel's high water mark.

David was the king against whom all other kings were measured.

David was the king who was after God's own heart, the king, both gifted and flawed, who sinned before the Lord and also confessed his sin, whose trust remained in the God who sustained him, and whose trust formed the heart of God's covenant with Israel.

We read it and we may race ahead to Jesus, but those listeners of Isaiah's word would have raced back to David, back to the promise, back to the other reality – that God is not done with them yet.

All that we see may present one reality – but God has a different vision sometimes. God has a different vision – perhaps all the time.

I read this week of a recording that was made by Simon and Garfunkel in the 1960's. It was an art piece, designed to make a point. They recorded the hymn *Silent Night* against the backdrop of the Vietnam War. Against the strains of the song were heard the staccato punctuation of gunshots.<sup>1</sup>

The point is clear. The specter of war slashes at the salvific strains of the hymn. The reality of war and death negates the warm glow of candlelight around the carol reducing it to a fairy-tale.

But I wonder if there is another way to hear it?

What if we reverse the way we listen to it?

What if the strains of the carols wash over the ugliness of gunshots, presenting instead a new vision - their vision of a coming world?

Of course, it's true of every age.

Every issue of *The Week* magazine has a section that is titled, "The US at a glance..." It's a recap of this past week's news. There were six entries this week, let me tell you what they were. Three white San Jose State students were accused of hate crimes for decorating a dorm with Confederate flags, forcing their black roommate to wear a bicycle lock around his neck and calling him, 'three fifths' in a reference to the US Constitution

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<sup>1</sup> Pulpit Digest, Nov-Dec 1990. P19

recognizing slaves as three-fifths of a person. In New York City, a pandemic of attacks are attributed to adolescents playing what is called “the knockout game” in which an unsuspecting stranger is punched in the back of the head. The teen wins the game if the victim is knocked out in a single glow. In Boston, a crime lab technician was sentenced to three to five years in jail for falsifying records leading to hundreds of convictions and burnishing her career. In Steubenville, Ohio, a grand jury indicted four school employees for covering up the rape of 16 year old in 2012. In Birmingham, a posthumous pardon was granted to three black men 82 years after they were falsely accused of a crime, convicted by all-white juries in 1931. And in Newtown, Connecticut, the Lanza Report was released.<sup>2</sup>

It’s not always that bad, but what a week!

I don’t know about you, but I need a new zoo.

I need a different vision of reality.

I need redemption.

I need the hymns and carols to play over this and tell their stories of redemption.

The heart of the Gospel is the story of redemption.

The whole Bible is the story of hope.

That’s why the hope springs through in Isaiah – because God is never done.

Walter Brueggemann writes,

“The Old Testament voices the oldest, deepest, most resilient grounding of hope in all of human history...

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<sup>2</sup> *The Week*, Dec. 6, 2013. P7

YHWH has sworn to effect futures of well-being that are beyond the present condition of the world and that cannot, in any credible way, be extrapolated from the present.”<sup>3</sup>

That is the hope of the Gospel: that when it appears that things are just about as bad as they could possibly be – when things are as bad as a messiah strung up on a cross – that God is not done, that God is never done, that we can yet hear “the clear, though far off strains that hail a new creation...”

That is the Gospel promise: that hope never dries up. That God can, and God will, create a new reality, a vision as absurd as a peaceable kingdom.

You know, for most of us, when your life is going great, then there’s probably not so much for me to say to you today about a hopeful future. But maybe for one or two – or maybe three or four of us, life is hard and loneliness creeps in. Maybe for a handful of us – or perhaps more than a handful - Christmas is just one more expense, one more looming pressure needing quickly to pass. Or maybe you are mourning. Holidays are hard when you’re mourning; I think perhaps the hardest of all.

Don’t give up, there’s a new zoo coming, and God has plans.

From the shreds of what could have been, God puts together a new creation, again and again.

That is what redemption is. It is God taking what *is* and making it into what *can be*.

I love a story that Anne Lamott tells in her new book, Stitches.

After her dog, Bodhi, shredded two different sets of curtains defending her against an unknown threat, either an assassin or the postman, she was left with two curtains that were perfectly fine in the upper portions, but ripped to pieces in the lower portions as her

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<sup>3</sup> Brueggemann, Walter. Reverberations of Faith. (Westminster/JKP, Louisville, 2002) P100

dog leapt through them, ultimately wearing them, much like the tutu wearing hippos of *Fantasia*.

She writes that she gave them to her friend to see what could be made from them. Two tops of curtains, no bottoms, and a seamstress. She writes,

“She wondered if the two tops could be mated, and ended up taking them home to see what she could do. This is all restoration requires most of the time, that one person not give up.”

After telling the story of her friend’s creative work, she concludes, “The newly sewn curtain was fabulous and crazy. Whereas before it had been logical and tranquil, now it was one wild lake of designs. Once it was two torn up curtains, and now it was a whole, although a whole with issues... beauty is a miracle of things going together imperfectly... what might have been thrown out went from tattered scraps to something majestic and goofy and honest that holds together, that keeps people’s eyes off of me and my family, yet lets in light and sun, like a poem or a song.

You have to keep taking the next necessary stitch, and the next one, and the next.

Without stitches, you just have rags.

And we are not rags.”<sup>4</sup>

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Lamott, Anne. Stitches: A Handbook on Meaning, Hope and Repair. (Riverhead, NY 2013) Pp82-83.