December 1st, 2019

Springfield Presbyterian Church

Advent II: PEACE

10:30 am

The Lion and the Lamb

I. Pairings

If you were listening very keenly during our Isaiah passage this morning, you may have noted that the title of my sermon seems strange. For, in the passage, the lion and the lamb are never paired together. Rather, it is an image that has been emblazoned in the memories of many – we’ve seen stained glass windows, stunning paintings, and the like of the lion and the lamb.

I can’t say I know the history of why we’ve come to that image as a sign of great hope and peace, but it offers a different picture of the world than the one we live in today. Isaiah pairs fascinating animals: the wolf with the lamb, the leopard with the kid, the calf and the lion, the cow and the bear, and the little children play without fear. Even snakes do not bite. And a little child will lead them, these big husky and brave animals. It leads the modern reader to ask Isaiah – are you painting a poetic prophecy or just a fantasy of how you wish the world would look.

If you log onto your computer and go to YouTube and type in, ‘Unbelievable Unlikely Animal Friendships’, you will get a ten minute video of super cute friendships that will ultimately make you smile and warm your heart. There’s images of a dog with baby chicks, an ape and a cat snuggling, and a puppy and leopard joyfully playing together. Again, it delights us, because it gives us that quick glimpse of something we innately want: peace, unity, and love between the most unlikely pairings.

II. If beasts can do it...

It brings us then to this questions – if these beasts, these animals, who are bred and born into the cycle of the food chain - if they can find their way to join together, then it would stand reason that humans should be able to do the same. Can you imagine other unusual pairings in the human world – a strong right republican sitting next to a more left than ever democrat and having a civil conversation? A KKK clan member sitting down and hearing with empathy stories of oppression from a black individual who has endured that injustice? An individual who despises Islamic practices because of Radical Islam in conversation with a devout Islamic person? A family member whose history is tied to Nazi Germany having a conversation with someone who has survived the holocaust?

Impossible. Improbable at best. Our rightful cynicism at best saying – those pairings will never happen. And, you would be right...and wrong. You would be right in saying that it’s improbable, but we’ve seen through the course of history these conversations happening. We learn from our history. Hop onto youtube again, and you’ll see the stories that we don’t often hear – A former KKK member becoming friends with a Syrian Asylum Refugee. Another beautiful story is an African American man sharing a friendship with someone from the KKK and through that friendship, the man left the KKK. The unusual pairings do happen. They do, they offer us hope, it’s just that you have to dig through the mass media and more commonly streamed stories of terror and violence to find the hope.

III. You have to dig

The reality is, particularly in seasons of grief, of terror, of violence, you’ve got to dig. You have to take to the hard work of finding hope in a sea of hopelessness. The stump of Jesse from our Isaiah passage reminded me of this important garden rule. So, when you go ahead and plant something in the ground, something you want to last, something big - you don’t often just dig up some dirt and plop the bulb in the ground. Sometimes you do, but most of the time you’ve got to till the land, right? If you want this plant or tree to last, you want to dig a bit deeper, you want to remove all the loose roots and weeds from the ground so your new plant isn’t suffocated by those old weeds.

I think about Ivy, which is a beautiful plant, but right now I have a tree that is covered in Ivy, which is somewhat beautiful, but because ivy is so invasive, it takes over, it traps the tree, and the tree at some point, if not maintained, well – the branches start to die.

I’m no master gardener or landscaper, but I know well enough that the land and earth can offer us important metaphors and lessons for our own lives. We ourselves can get tangled up in bad news, that we can’t even see the good. We can be too tired to take out the weeds and dig deeper to find out the good news that is in our hearts and our lives. If you take the time, dig a bit deeper, maybe, just maybe, you and I can get past all the garbage streamed on mass media, and find those stories of renewal, hope, and peace.

IV. Isaiah’s story

If this is the world that we are living in, I had to look back at the world Isaiah was living in: was he living in all this beautiful ideas of hope and life and love and peace and joy...and the reality is...no. Isaiah was writing this prophecy while looking out at the Assyrian army slicing through his native land of Palestine, killing and harming the people, leaving blood on the streets. He was living through the first holocaust of the Jews, sometime between 740 and 700 B.C.D. Five times during those forty years the Assyrian army threw destruction wherever it went.

So, Isaiah is writing this prophecy, while legitimately walking and living through hell on earth. Which says to me, if Isaiah can try to imagine it and dream it and conceive of this life that will come and he is trying to live into it in the midst of terror and killing and violence – then we have that same privilege and responsibility. We too, can’t take ourselves off the hook, saying that it’s ‘too hard’ or ‘too impossible’ to live into. Frankly, if Isaiah can dream it, than we can too. And we actually have what Isaiah didn’t have – Isaiah dreamt of the child that will lead in the wilderness, but he never knew Jesus. We do, we have an advent time of waiting and watching, but we know what is to come, we witness to it, and we acknowledge what Isaiah could not – that hope will soon be here, in a little town called Bethlehem.

V. The charge and the challenge

Every week I hand over to you a challenge – a way to make sense of Scripture in our lives today. I recognize – I never really make those challenges easy, because frankly living a life of faith isn’t easy. When you come to this sanctuary, when you come to worship to celebrate our living God, you aren’t coming only for a gentle peace – you come, hopefully, that your mind will be a bit more open and that openness and curiosity will craft you further into the person God is calling you and I to be in this world.

So the challenge again here is not easy, but if you are looking for a tangible challenge, here it is: I want you to go online, go to a book, go to an art piece, go to a newspaper – and I want you to find five things that give you hope in this world. I want you to dig through all the, pardon my French, crap, that is posted on social media and other networks, and I want you to find those five things that make you say, ‘this is life lived remarkably’ or ‘this is closer to the kingdom that God calls us to.’ They don’t have to be huge stories, maybe it’s a line, maybe a paragraph, but find those five things, and then share them with those you love. Spread hope, spread peace, and instead of spreading stories of harm and destruction, let us start spreading the good news that God is alive, alert, and awake and working in this world. Amen.