

Scripture: Isaiah 11:1-10

Sermon Title: "Peace Not Pieces"

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Coyotes and cows do not mix well. This, of course, to most of us makes a lot of sense. The coyote, a carnivore which enjoys the taste of meat, of flesh, and the cow, a herbivore which thrives on grasses and grains, for obvious reasons do not make good bedfellows. The coyote's very nature is one that would prefer to make pieces out of the cow rather than to live in peace. And, on the farm growing up in Pennsylvania, we had to deal with this first hand. While for many years, there was little or no talk of eastern coyotes in our area, the populations continued to grow in the state and eventually, the howl of the coyote could be heard from time-to-time in the night. Ultimately, the increased presence of the coyote turned deadly on our farm. One night, as far as we can tell, the cows in the field were laying down, many of them huddled together in a tight pack when we believe a coyote got into the field spooking the cattle and leaving one cow dead. Like I said, coyotes and cows do not mix well.

In our scripture reading for today which comes from the Prophet Isaiah, he foretells of the kingdom of Jesus - a peace-filled kingdom, where God's righteousness and equity rule. Where all of creation lives together in harmony - no threat of violence, no enemies, no fear, just peace. And he uses such poetic language including this imagery of a wolf living with a lamb, a calf and lion together, a child and a snake, one might even add a coyote and a cow living in harmony. And, of course, this imagery is then to be extended to all relationships that live in tension that there will be peace. Now this kingdom in its fullest form, is one that many believe will only be completely realized when Christ shall come again. And when we look at the world since Jesus first came into it on that very first Christmas, including as we look at the world around us today, it would appear that the peace-filled kingdom is a distant hope. Sure, we may and we do, see glimpses of this future and we as Christ's disciples are called into the work of offering and creating such glimpses and experiences of God's righteous kingdom, whether in big or small

ways. But to see it in its fullest manifestation, we are not there yet. Still, every Advent season, we light this candle for peace, proclaiming that in the birth of Jesus there is a gift of peace offered to us. A gift of peace present for us now, and if that gift does not look like the harmonious kingdom shared in Isaiah, what then does it look like?

Here's how I see that gift of peace in the birth of Jesus manifesting among us. It starts within each and every one of us – as we are reminded in the birth of Jesus of God's deep love that never lets us go we find a sense of inner peace as we embrace our identity as God's beloved children. But it doesn't end there, for when we first find that peace within and then gather in community as we are today, with hearts changed by and attuned to peace, even where there may be differences among us, we begin to glimpse that kingdom, spoken of by Isaiah. For in this community of faith, having been touched by the gift of Jesus, we are directed by peace and not by a desire to tear one another's spirit to pieces – and so we can start to see that kingdom.

And yet, beloved people of God, it is important that we remember always that we are not yet in that peaceful kingdom of which Isaiah foretold and there will be moments when the peace within us, that peace that we feel and that strive to manifest in transformative ways in our community, will flicker and and at times fade. There will be moments when we will succumb to, what may even be seen as a nature within, damaging desires as we strike and pounce our enemy and leave the gift and hope of peace behind. There will be little moments when the community around us may feel distant from that peaceful kingdom of God – and yet, we are called to take heart and in those most challenging moments, reach out for that peace of God once more. For when it would seem that our world is filled with people tearing others to pieces, then, more than ever, now more than ever, the world needs hearts and hands that are striving for peace. In those moments, we should not be conforming to the tearing down of one another but instead being a sign of hope, a sign of light, a sign of love, as we ground our spirits in peace. Using the imagery and metaphor of Isaiah, when faced with a wolf,

how will we embrace the identity as the lamb? When an adder, an asp, a snake prepares to strike, how will we be the child?

You know, some might say in the moments in which we are facing situations that threaten to tear us to pieces, that the most dangerous thing then and there is the one about to strike. But I would offer that, in addition, there is a hidden danger in forsaking the peace offered by Jesus, the peace into which we are called to live. There is a hidden danger in trading that peace for fear, or hatred, or disdain, or something else that takes us away from glimpsing that harmonious kingdom. For what happens to our spirit, to our soul when we discard that inner peace, when we lose sight of love, when we don't even try to find hope anymore?

I want to take us back for just a moment to the story of the coyote and the cows and I want to embrace a lesson that I learned in that experience. The coyote entered the field where the cows slept in peace looking to tear them to pieces. And yes, in the end, one cow was dead but it was not the coyote that killed the cow. For when the cows were startled awake, and peace left them, they scrambled to their feet to run out of fear, and in their running, they trampled one of their own. And when I think about this experience, I am struck by what I see as a lesson within it: for it was not the one who sought to tear others to pieces that ultimately destroyed, it was those who had lost peace.

As we live in this world, peace will always be a challenge to manifest in large ways. And yet, if we let peace take root in the small ways, if we let our hearts be ruled by it, if we commit to living our lives striving to witness to it even when we are surrounded by others striving to tear us to pieces, I believe there is much power there. A power of peace that transforms us from within and then, through us, begins to touch and transform the world. It won't always be easy, it won't be quick, there may be times when it appears less than fruitful - we will have our challenges, but may we always, to the best of our ability as we call upon God to guide us, may we strive to always choose Christ's gift of peace rather than tearing one another to pieces. Amen.