



“Isaiah’s Peace: A Quiet Shalom”

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December 10, 2017

Isaiah 11:1-9

A Story of Unlikely Peace

Once upon a time there was a bear named Baloo, a lion named Leo, and a tiger named Shere Khan. No, this isn’t a new version of Disney’s *Jungle Book*. This rather unlikely trio of male predators has been best friends for almost two decades. The three animals were only a few months old when police found them in 2001 during a drug raid. When they were found in the basement of the home being raided, Leo, an African lion, had been inside a small crate and suffered from an open, infected wound on his nose. Baloo, an American black bear, was found wearing a harness that he had outgrown and was embedded into his fur. And Shere Khan, a Bengal tiger, was severely underweight. All three of the cubs were scared, malnourished, and diseased when the Georgia Department of Natural Resources brought them to Noah’s Ark Animal Sanctuary, a 250-acre nonprofit animal rescue just south of Atlanta. The cubs’ living condition had left them so weakened and afraid, the rescuers decided not to release them back into the wild but to keep them at the sanctuary instead. And it was their strong friendship that kept them alive. It was an unlikely bond that made the sanctuary decide to keep all three in the same habitat.

Allison Hedgecoth, curator at Noah’s Ark Animal Sanctuary where the predators now live said, “The Bear, Lion, and Tiger, BLT, as they are affectionately known, exhibited signs of being a bonded trio from the moment we saw them when they arrived at Noah’s Ark. They were already seeking out one another for comfort and displayed affection by snuggling, grooming, and playing with one another.”

And so, 16 years later, the three animals are still together. For sanctuary staffers, the hardest part of watching over different species in the same enclosure is making sure that all their needs are met simultaneously. That includes their nutritional, medical, and behavioral requirements. Baloo is the dominant, confident, and most relaxed one in the group. Leo can sometimes be distant, but is always aware of his surroundings. Shere Khan is curious and always wants to play. Yet still, these three predators live together, sleep together, and even eat together as a family. Hedgecoth says that “even though they live in a three-acre enclosure, they’re usually within 100 feet of each other at all times. That’s proof that they’re not just coexisting or cohabiting, they actually do enjoy each other’s company.”

Their initial bond wasn’t unusual to Hedgecoth though; what surprised her was their enduring, 15-year friendship. She said that “before they reach maturity, a lot of times animals will form unique bonds with members of other species but will eventually grow apart.” What was

surprising to Hedgecoth was how the three kept their bond, that family unit, well into adulthood. A lion, tiger and bear, have become lifelong friends.

It is an unlikely peace. It is an unlikely peace that predators are pals and enemies are friends. Just like it is an unlikely peace that was envisioned by the prophet Isaiah. It is an unlikely peace when a fragile baby is born into a harsh world. It is an unlikely peace when the angels cry out and the shepherds are silenced in fear. It is an unlikely peace when a lowly child will be raised on a cross. It is an unlikely peace that will happen in a little town of Bethlehem. Let us learn from and lean into Advent's unlikely peace.

Isaiah's Peace: A Quiet Shalom Isaiah 11:1-9

Advent. This is the time of year when we desire to live in a peaceable kingdom. But often we can't hear the whispers of peace among the shouts of war. We can't see the solitary flower pushing through the concrete of chaos. The voice of peace in the Bible begins quietly in the Garden where all of creation lives in harmony. But, by the time we read our text for today and encounter the words of the prophet Isaiah, this voice has gotten louder and louder. The voice of God, through those wild-eyed, visionary, peace-hungry prophets called out for better days, days when a small branch would take root and grow into a peaceable kingdom. Days when predators no longer hunt and prey no longer run, when lions and tigers and bears are friends, oh my. Days that are better, more just, and more loving.

The Jews of prophet Isaiah's time had a word to describe those better days. The word was *shalom*, which is Hebrew for peace. In the Bible, God's peace – *shalom* – meant much more than simply the absence of war. It was more than a blissful state in our spirits or a sense of harmony between humanity and God. The longing for God's shalom was bigger and broader. Shalom meant not only inner peace or spiritual peace but a wholeness and completeness throughout all of creation. It meant the end of injustice. It meant the end of violence. It meant the end of war. It meant the powerful would no longer devour the weak. It meant all brokenness would be made whole and healing would come. It meant that people would love one another unconditionally and wholeheartedly. Shalom was an all-encompassing peace that would flow deeply and broadly, embracing all of creation, including plants and animals and the earth itself.

And for the Jews who lived during the time of the prophets, the hope of shalom was wrapped up in the coming of a person. Someone was coming, they believed, who would open the doors wide to peace. But the question was who. The prophet Isaiah put it this way: "For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given... and he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." And, as we see in today's reading, God whispered into the world of war

yet again, “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots, a branch will bear fruit.” And we too wonder, who will be the bearer of shalom? Who is the one to bring us this quiet peace?

In a radio interview, Nazi concentration camp survivor Gerta Weissman recalled an event one spring when she and her fellow concentration camp inmates stood for roll call for hours on end, nearly collapsing with hunger and fatigue. She said, “We noticed in the corner of this bleak, horrid, gray place that the concrete had broken in a corner and a flower had poked its head through it. And you would see thousands of feet shuffle every morning to avoid stepping on that flower...” That is what it is like to be in the season of Advent. We see a tiny baby, the beautiful indwelling of God, resting in a dilapidated manger. We see a savior born into a bleak, horrid, gray world. It is no wonder the concentration camp inmates were careful not to step on that flower. Peace was a tiny flower poking its head through the hard concrete. Peace was a flower representing hope and beauty and life to the weary captives.

As we continue to learn more about the prophet Isaiah, we find that he too could hear the whispers of peace pushing up through the concrete of a troubled world. Isaiah knew what it felt like to live in a world of war. In the year 700 B.C.E., violence was raging around Isaiah. The Jews had been fighting for four decades against the mighty Assyrians and Egyptians. Their enemies were bigger and stronger and their will to resist was nearly depleted. The late Bill Self, Baptist pastor and a former colleague of mine in Atlanta, described this awful time for the people of God, saying, “Five times during these forty years did the Assyrian army, the vast and superior Assyrian army, stampede through the hill country of Israel working terror and destruction wherever it went. With no regard for anyone’s culture, with no regard for anyone’s religion, with no regard for anyone else’s life, they came like a scorpion plague, devouring everything and everyone in their path. Over and over and over, the people of . . . Judah had been ravaged. The horrid sounds of war were ever familiar. The cries of pain seldom ceased. Who could plant a field and have any hope that it would survive to the harvest? Who could bear a child with a confidence that it would reach maturity? It was a horrible forty years, those years in which Isaiah lived.”

But, as we see in the text for today, Isaiah refused to give in to the desperateness and despair. Isaiah still managed to find hope, to know that God was bringing peace. In the midst of the chaos and war, Isaiah was able to hear the whispers of peace, the quiet shalom. And just as Isaiah refused to give in to the anger, violence, and fear, so must we look towards a quiet town of Bethlehem, the city of bread, the place where the Living Bread, a mere morsel of divine power, would leaven the world with a new and better way, a new and better peace, a quiet shalom.

All around Isaiah, things appeared bleak, horrid, and gray. The reign of Israel’s greatest king, King David, the son of Jesse was a distant memory. And Isaiah compared his people’s situation to a stump that was left in the forest after a great tree had been cut down. But, Isaiah saw that on that stump of Jesse, a shoot would appear, and a new tree would emerge bearing much fruit, a branch would spring forth, a flower would poke its head through concrete. And, “the wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them.”

And that is the quiet shalom we hope to experience as we continue through this Advent season. We lean into Isaiah's peace, into Isaiah's beautiful image of a time when there is no more fighting, when wars have ceased, when swords have become plowshares, spears have become pruning hooks, and predators' claws have become helping hands. We celebrate the birth of that shoot from the stump of Jesse, the one born in a quiet, insignificant town. And though our Messiah comes from an insignificant place, he is nevertheless God's significant peace giver. This promised and quiet shalom is wrapped in swaddling clothes and enfolded in one person. This reality we're aching and longing for, that always seems out of reach, has come, and it's bound up in a baby to be born. And so, this Advent season, let us hear the soft infant cries that will pierce our prisons and defy the desolate darkness, cries that will ring out in the quiet shalom.

Amen.