

FLOWERS IN THE DESERT: NEW LIFE IN GOD'S KINGDOM

THE PEACEABLE KINGDOM

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Isaiah 11:1-10

If you are like me, there are occasions when you are extremely annoyed at what someone is doing and you declare, "If I were king, this wouldn't be allowed to happen." For me, the "this" in question is whatever it is that is annoying me at the moment—maybe it is a tailgater, or the driver of the car in front of me who stops at the light and drops their cigarette butt out the window as if the world is their personal trashcan, or maybe it is people who, at a concert, are constantly messing with their cell phones. If I were king, cell phones would be banned from concerts and litterers would be placed in stocks. I am sure that you have your own list of what you would change if you were king or queen of your realm.

If pressed on this matter, you would claim that if you ever did become a queen or king that you would certainly be a benevolent ruler, that all your actions would be for the happiness and well-being of your people.

However, what if this fantasy went to a darker place and instead of wanting to be monarch you desired to be a dictator—and not a good dictator, but a tyrant, a despot, an autocrat. Everything you do as dictator is designed to bring you wealth and power. You don't care about our people other than their ability to enrich you.

But to be such a dictator takes work or else the people will rise up against you. You have to oppress them at every turn. You have to make them live in fear. You have to keep them poor and dependent. You can't allow them to travel. You can't allow them to think. You have to control the media. Do your people crave news? Then they can only read your newspaper and watch your television station. And then there is matter of books. You can't have your people reading anything that may talk about freedom and human rights; you can't have them reading anything that might provide even the slightest glimmer of hope. You will have to rid the land of all those books. If I planned to become a tyrant, then the first book I would eliminate would be the Bible. From cover to cover, our Bible is a book of hope that directs us to a new reality, a brighter existence.

We see this vividly in today's reading from the book of Isaiah. In the 11th chapter we read Isaiah's description of a new ruler and a kingdom of peace. This portion of Isaiah was written in the eighth-century BC at a time of great political turmoil and military uncertainty in the nation of Judah. Judah's neighbors, the Assyrians, were preparing to wage war and the nation was terrified.

It is difficult for us in this country to imagine the fear these people faced. We live in a nation with a powerful military. Except for Mexico and Canada, we are

geographically isolated from the rest of the world. The possibility of an invasion is slim.

But imagine if the states of the US weren't states but individual countries. And each country spoke its own language and had its own customs and tradition. And imagine that here in the nation of Tennessee we were constantly under threat of an invasion from Kentucky or Alabama or Georgia or any of our other neighbors. We had been at war before and we knew the consequences. We knew from experience that war meant people killed, and buildings burned, and fields trampled. We knew war. If this is inevitable, then what hope is there?

And so we can turn to Isaiah. In these pages, the prophet offers a vision of hope, a promise of a new reality. He could not eliminate the Assyrian threat but he could offer his people a reason to live.

In his prophesy, hope emerges from that which is dead. In this case, it is a tree stump. Isaiah calls this *the stump of Jesse*. Jesse was the father of David, the last great king of Israel and Judah. When David died two-hundred years earlier, the kingdom split.

But Isaiah promises that out of the stump of Jesse shall emerge a single shoot. And this shall be a new ruler, and this ruler shall with equity and justice, with righteousness and faithfulness. This ruler will be a man of God. As Isaiah puts it, *His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord*. God's spirit will rest on this ruler. He shall have wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, he shall know the Lord.

And his kingdom shall be like no other before, like no kingdom of this earth. It shall be what we call the peaceable kingdom where nature is reordered. The predator will live with the prey, the hunter with the hunted, and their shepherd will be small child.

*The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.*

The lion shall eat straw like the ox.

The child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

I don't have to remind you that for the past year we studied the Gospel of Luke. And early in that gospel, Jesus declared that his purpose in the world was to *proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God* (Lk 4:43). But you will recall that Luke didn't offer us much information on exactly what the kingdom of God was like. In fact, he gave almost no description at all about the kingdom. For us reading Luke's gospel, this was a bit frustrating. What was this kingdom like? But Luke

didn't need to describe the kingdom because it was described in detail through the scriptures. One such place is here in Isaiah. What is the kingdom like? The kingdom is ruled by a righteous person who keeps God at the center of everything. This ruler will watch over the poor and the meek. In the kingdom the old rules of predator and prey are obsolete. The wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the goat, and others shall live in harmony. The lion will be a vegetarian.

As Christians, we recognize this kingdom as God's house. It is where Christ reigns. As Isaiah says, *It shall be glorious.*

In our nation today, we may not need to worry about foreign armies invading our land, but that does not mean that we are immune from fear and despair. We know the suffering of the loss of someone we love; when a relationship fails it feels like our home is burned; when we are confronted by disease it is like an army marching across our land trampling everything in sight.

For that time when all is dark and our world is crumbling, Isaiah offers us a glimpse of God's kingdom. Out of a crack in the sidewalk a fragile shoot reaches up, a sliver of hope in a dead world, a sliver of peace in the chaos. By all rights, the kingdom should not be here. We don't deserve it. But it is here, it is coming, it is a gift from God. May we do all in our power to prepare ourselves for the kingdom.

Amen.