



LESSONS IN LIVING

“Visions of Peace”

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Rev. Erica Knisely
December 7, 2025

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 11:1-9 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Then a shoot will sprout from the stump of Jesse; from Jesse's roots, a branch will blossom: The Spirit of YHWH will rest on you—a spirit of wisdom and understanding, a spirit of counsel and strength, a spirit of knowledge and reverence for YHWH. You will delight in obeying YHWH, and you won't judge by appearances, or make decisions by hearsay. You will treat poor people with fairness and will uphold the rights of the land's downtrodden. With a single word you will strike down tyrants; with your decrees you will execute evil people. Justice will be the belt around your waist—faithfulness will gird you up.*

Then the wolf will dwell with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the young goat; the calf and the lion cub will graze together, and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear; their young will lie down together. The lion will eat hay like the ox. The baby will play next to the den of the cobra, and the toddler will dance over the viper's nest. There will be no harm, no destruction anywhere in my holy mountain; for as water fills the sea, so the land will be filled with knowledge of YHWH. On that Day, the Root of Jesse will serve as a symbol to the peoples of the world—nations will flock to you, and your home will be a place of honor. On that Day, YHWH will once more raise a hand to recover the remnant of what is left of the people, and gather them back from Assyria, Egypt, Pathros, Ethiopia, Elam, Shinar, Hamath, and the islands of the sea.

* YHWH represents the divine name found in the Hebrew text. It represents the Divine Mystery and, traditionally, is not pronounced. Instead, we say “God” or some other term of reverence.

Sermon

Before I gave up social media, I had, as much as possible, trained my algorithm on Instagram to show me videos of babies laughing, which is maybe one of the best sounds in the world, a lot of really good feminist propaganda, my favorite, and also videos of rescue animals and unlikely friendships that have formed in the animal world.

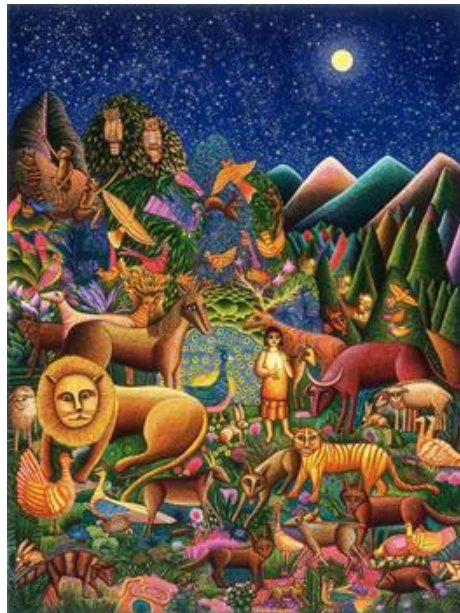


It's a pretty good way to go to sleep at night by looking at all these cute images. A lot of these animals aren't natural friends, but they either grew up together in infancy or they were brought together after a period of deprivation and found comfort in one another. I think these kinds of images tug at the heartstrings.

They're not the norm, but they do show us that it's possible for prey and predator to lie down together without one becoming a meal for the other. This vision has captivated us. This vision that's in the scripture that we read today from Isaiah of wolf and lamb lying down together, of cow and bear, and kids playing over viper's nests and not getting stung. I think it speaks to this idea that the impossible might be possible given the right circumstance.

That peace might be possible.

This vision has been the subject of a lot of art over the years.



This is the Peaceable Kingdom by John August Swanson. He made this in the 1990's. He started working on this image in the '60's. He has lots of different iterations of it, but it was something he kept coming back to over the course of his life because it spoke both to the desire for peace in our world and peace within.

He was inspired by another painter named Edward Hicks, who painted the same scripture about a century earlier. We'll look at that one later.

Isaiah 11, which we're drawing from today, is from the Hebrew scriptures, one of the prophets. It's written at a time when they have experienced the devastation of the Assyrian Empire and the exile of a lot of their leaders. He describes a ruler who restores Israel after that devastation, a ruler who is filled with a spirit of courage and strength and wisdom, who judges faithfully for the poor of the earth, and describes that reign in these ways.

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

It says,

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Holy One, just as the waters cover the sea.

And I love that line,

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain.

No revenge killings, no drone attacks, no children starving, no one firing upon people clinging to the side of a boat, no disrespect or violation of bodies or boundaries, no withholding of rights, no hoarding, no shackling people coming home for Thanksgiving vacation from university, people just trying to feed their families, going to school, no violence at all.

Isaiah gives us this cosmic view of a world where peace and harmony reign between all living creatures. It's a symbol of the reordering of human relationships on a massive and total scale. It's really a reordering of hearts and minds, and even what we might call our natural instincts toward violence. It describes a world that's been washed clean of it all. I think it's really hard sometimes to conjure up an image like that in our present world, an image of a world at peace. It seems like a fairytale. It seems impossible.

Whether we think it's possible or not, I think there's something vitally important about holding a vision of a world in peace and harmony in our minds and hearts. One of the wisdom sayings I really like from Proverbs is, "*without a vision, the people perish.*" [Proverbs 29:18] So literally, without a divine vision, the people are unrestrained, they're perishing, they're vulnerable. To me, it says we need something good and beautiful and true, pulling us forward, giving us a path to walk, leading us on in a shared sense of purpose.

If we don't have a shared sense of purpose, if we don't name that purpose, if we don't cast that vision, other people will, and they do. Take, for instance, Alexander Karp. If you don't know that name, he is one of the founders and CEO of Palantir. Palantir is a software and AI company. You might have heard about them in the news more recently. They developed something called the Gotham platform, which requires its own exegesis. They've gotten attention because this

platform integrates facial recognition, license plate reader data, social media activity, geo-location data, and they integrate that all into threat scores and behavioral profiles.

It's being used by ICE already and local police departments in areas. Palantir has a multimillion-dollar partnership with the Department of Defense. But behind this technology is a vision, a vision of peace, in a sense. Karp co-authored a book this year called *The Technological Republic: Hard Power, Soft Belief, and the Future of the West*.

I haven't read it, but I've read about it. What I understand is he names the problem as this, that particularly in the tech sector, which he moves in, he says they've squandered their talent and their skills by focusing on the trivial, on things that promote shallow engagement by consumers, photo sharing, ad targeting, lifehacking, all of that. He said that the best minds have turned inwards. The engineers are unmoored from any sense of national purpose. He harkens back to the days of the Manhattan Project or space exploration. The solution he gives is ultimately that the tech sector needs to recover a sense of moral purpose, a higher calling toward the good. He uses that language, and he even draws on biblical passages, Thoreau, and Emerson. The good that he seems to name is ensuring Western dominance.

He says, engineers need, therefore, to accept the moral burden to develop the tools that will ensure the US will win against, "adversaries unconstrained by ethical considerations." He wants to renew this union between the software, the tech industry, and the government.

Palantir is just one manifestation of this broader vision that he's trying to call people toward. This book has been on bestseller lists, NPR, New York Times, and others. I agree with a little bit of what he names. We can focus our energy on something better, something less shallow. We can invest our time and our talent into a higher calling. I think we are missing a sense of a shared vision and a sense of purpose, maybe even a sense of reality that we share more broadly. I think we need that vision.

But not a vision where we trade our civil liberties for security and prosperity. Not a vision where we allow others to be brutalized so we can win against our adversaries.

Which adversaries?

And win at what exactly?

It's a little squishy. The kind of peace this vision offers is never a peace for the whole. It's always just for some portion of the population, while the rest suffer in deprivation or violence.

It's not a novel vision. It's just a new iteration of an old theme. We reject this vision because we're grounded in a different way in the teachings of Jesus Christ, and a path of love and universal human rights. We can't be content to let a Palantir-like vision become ascendant.

We need something else. I think we even have a call or a responsibility to name something else and offer something better to the world.

I want to turn back to Isaiah 11 to see, is there anything there that can help us ground our vision? What can we make of this cosmic image of wolves and lambs and bears and cows and children all cohabiting. Carrying this idea that they will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain? Is that a fairytale? Is it utopian idealism? Or is it a true calling to something better? Is it a call to the heart?

I think more than anything, this vision of a peaceful world, it's meant to be felt. It's a call to our heart. It's a spark of joy and wonder leading us on, leading our hearts forward. It's the meaning of the Advent season.

Can we take time to hear and feel and sense in our very being our way into a peaceful world. Even if we just get a glimmer or a glimpse of that bright star rising in the night sky, telling us there is something better. It leads us onward toward a different reality, and we just see a little glimpse of it.

As we tune ourselves to that cosmic vision of a peace-filled world. As we try to move from symbol to action and naming another vision as best we can for this time and this place, I think Isaiah also has wisdom to share about that.

For any vision to be good, it needs to flow from our Source, from that which connects all of us, the ground of our being. For that vision to be good, it has to center the most vulnerable. It has to be good for *everybody*.

We also must hold that vision with humility. Isaiah was written in the context of the Assyrian invasion and the exile of Judeans, a time of crisis and reckoning, a time of longing for restoration. Isaiah writes about a ruler who will reestablish that kingdom.

Isaiah says,

On that ruler, the spirit of the Holy One, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and strength, the spirit of knowledge will rest.

It says 'spirit' four different times, emphasizing spirit, spirit, spirit. That spirit will rest, and they will not judge by what they see or hear, but in a new way, one that's connected to the ground of their being.

This concept in the Hebrew scriptures is *ruach*, it's like the breath or this creative wind of God. This carries forward into the Christian scriptures as the Holy Spirit. This Holy Spirit is poured out on Jesus, who is the fulfillment of these things, and then shared with all of us.

The Holy Spirit - we all have access to that source, to that spirit, to that guide to ground our vision. That's the beginning point for the good thing that we want to see in the world.

Isaiah 11 also says this ruler will right the wrongs that were present before the Assyrians invaded. It isn't all the enemy from without. The problems he names are the oppression of and denial of justice to the poor, to the orphan, and to the widow.

That ruler who is clothed in righteousness and faithfulness judges with equity for the most vulnerable. This is a theme that runs throughout all of the scriptures. Care for the poor, the most vulnerable, the least of these. It's not something we hear in a lot of Christian circles, but it's the ethical imperative that guides us.

Any vision we have has to be tested on whether and how it imagines the world for the most vulnerable. Our society is only as good as we treat the least of these.

Finally, we must maintain humility about ourselves as bearers of the good vision, the peaceful world. I sometimes think we forget we're not the source of our own being but are expressions of it. We're not the painter standing outside the frame with a whole canvas in view. We are inside the painting. We're embedded in the world. We are part of it.

We have this rare ability as humans to step out and have glimpses of the whole picture, but we're still working within it. We're incredible. We're full of light and wonder, and we can also get things very wrong, even with good intentions.



This is the painting that I referred to earlier, the first version of the Peaceable Kingdom by Edward Hicks. This is from the late 1800's. He was an interesting person. He was a Quaker minister and an artist, and he made, over sixty different versions of the Peaceable Kingdom. They changed over the course of his life as he got frustrated with trying to live out peace in the real world.

You can see, even in this early one, it's a beautiful vision, but also you have this idyllic painting of the colonists meeting with the indigenous folk and look at how peaceful that is. But we know that's problematic. He didn't have it all right. He didn't see the whole picture. He didn't understand peace in all of its different ways for all people.

We can do that, too. We can miss the mark. We can miss part of the picture and get it wrong. We have to hold our vision of a peaceful world lightly and in conversation with others. We can also get disillusioned by living in this world and seeing our vision frustrated by the reality of life. But can we allow ourselves to be disappointed and also keep our vision clear.

When we're imagining and working toward a peaceful world, we have to stay rooted in source, in the goodness that connects us. We have to stay focused on the most vulnerable and stay humble, recognizing that our vision is limited.

But we also must cast a vision. If we choose not to, try to name or work toward a peaceful world, then we allow others to take up all of that empty space. We give room for other visions to become ascendant.

I think we're called to keep giving birth to this vision anew and to keep tending to the fire of our heart. We must hold on to a cosmic vision of a peaceful world, to train our eyes and our algorithms as best we can to that vision. We must tune our ears to that song, and sing that melody as loudly and clearly as we can.

At the end of the service, we're going to sing, *It Came Upon a Midnight Clear*. We'll sing that glorious song of old, from angels bending near the earth to touch their harps of gold, peace on earth and goodwill to all, from heaven, God's message we bring, the world in solemn stillness lay to hear the angels sing.

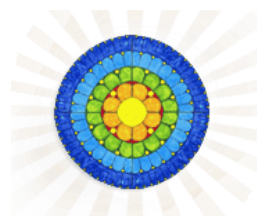
Will you open your heart and your mind to glimpse a vision of that world, the world at peace? I leave you now to your own reflections.

Benediction

Rev. Babs Miller

Each of you is a child of that wonderful spirit of love that we sometimes call God. That spirit knows when you skin your knee or your heart. That spirit knows when you admire a butterfly or cry in the darkness. So go out into this wonderful creation, tell the whole world that they are loved just exactly as they are. Go and kiss the hurts of this world. Go and laugh and play in the fields of grace and love. Go in peace. Amen.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.



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