

“Lions & Lambs”
Joseph J. Clifford, D.Min.
Text: Isaiah 11:1-9
Myers Park Presbyterian Church
December 8, 2019

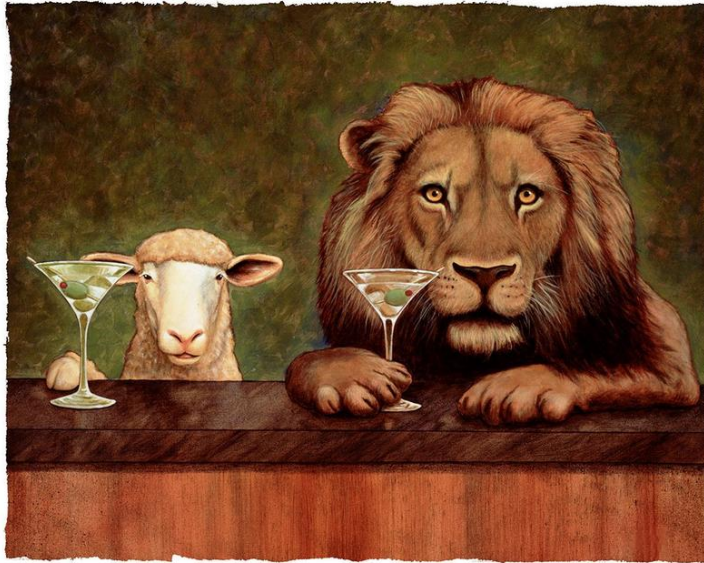
Isaiah 11:1-9

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. ²The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. ³His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; ⁴but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. ⁵Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. ⁶The 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. ⁷The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. ⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. ⁹They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

When I was a child, my Mom, who was an Art Therapist, drug me to art museums against my will, but by some sort of miraculous osmosis, a love of art sunk in. And so, one of the real pleasures of planning worship each Sunday is the opportunity to find meaningful art for the cover of the “Serve and Grow.” Google is an amazing tool to find these images. Upon discovering the right image, we reach out to the artist to seek their permission to use it and pay any required royalties. This morning’s image is a serigraph by John August Swanson entitled, “Peaceable Kingdom,” one of his most popular works. I was introduced to Swanson’s work when a previous church I served was given an art collection that included some of his pieces. The child of a Mexican mother and Swedish father, Swanson’s work is “influenced by the imagery of Islamic and medieval miniatures, and of Russian iconography; the color of Latin American folk art; and the tradition of Mexican muralists...He addresses human values, cultural roots, and the quest for self-discovery through visual images,... [creating] parables [that] optimistically embrace life and one’s spiritual transformation.”¹ His serigraphs are created through a silk screen process that can include up to 89 colors, creating incredible textures and brilliant detail. If today’s sermon isn’t working for you, just take in his work. It will be enough.

As I was searching for an image to use today, I came across something that was a close second. I really wanted to use it for the “Serve and Grow” but decided it was a bit to edgy. Nonetheless, I want to share it with you today:

¹ This is taken from the “About the Artist” section of Mr. Swanson’s website.
<http://www.johnaugustswanson.com/default.cfm/PID%3d1.html>



Don't you love it? It's by an artist named Will Bullas, who lives in Carmel Valley, California. His art is just plain fun, but this piece connects to a distinctly religious theme. In fact, he calls it, "Peaceable Kingdom," which is why it showed up in my google search. The painting captures the outrageous nature of Isaiah's vision we just heard. Let's face it, wolves don't live with lambs, they live *on* lambs. Leopards don't lie down with baby goats, unless their stomachs are full because they just ate one. Calves and lions and fatlings are not seen together, and no mother in her right mind would let her child play with a rattlesnake. That's just naïve. It's crazy. And a lion and a lamb would never be found sitting next to each other calmly enjoying their martinis. It could never happen. Yet here is this wonderfully modern interpretation of the outrageous, unthinkable, unimaginable vision of the peaceable kingdom.

I love the incredible detail of the painting, the wood of the bar, the reflections within the martinis. I love the light emanating from it. I love the expression—or lack thereof, on their faces. They've got that, "be cool" look of people sitting alone at a bar; yet they're not alone, they're next to each other. Most importantly, I love the way it opens our imagination to the impossible reality of the Peaceable Kingdom.

I wonder, is they are in a lion bar or a lamb bar? Let's face it, lambs tend to hang out with other lambs—it's a lot safer; and lions tend to hang with lions, unless they're hungry. What do you think, lion or lamb bar? Who is the one who is "out of place" at this bar? My guess is it's a lamb bar, because a lion walking into a lamb bar has a lot better chance of surviving than a lamb walking into a lion bar. Can you imagine? That would really be something.

Who do you think was the first to sit down? Was it the lamb? What do you think she did when the lion sat down next to her? What happened to her heart rate? What kind of courage did it take for her to stay put when likely every fiber of her being was infused with adrenaline fueling the flight instinct that has preserved her species? Why do you think that lion chose to sit down next to that lamb? He's not seeking a meal, because if he was, that lamb would already be gone. Maybe he doesn't have many friends in the lamb community and he is trying to diversify his social circles. Maybe he knows that having lived his whole life as a lion, he has absolutely no understanding of what it's like to be a lamb and maybe he believes he could learn a little something if he just sits down and listens. Maybe when the bartender asked, "What'll you have?" He said with a wry smile, "I'll have what she's having."

What if the lion was the first to sit down? If that was the case, what on earth possessed that lamb to choose that particular seat at the bar where a huge lion was already perched? Perhaps it was the last seat available—maybe it was crowded at the lamb bar and no one was willing to sit next to the lion, so the lamb took the last seat. Given they're the only two in the painting that doesn't seem to be the case. More likely, that lamb made an intentional decision to sit down next to that lion. What possessed her to do that? What did she have to womp up within her soul to move toward that seat and place herself down next to that lion? What kind of chutzpah did she possess to raise her finger and say to that bartender, "I'll have what he's having!"?

Here's another question: with whom do you identify? Do you feel more like a lion or do you identify more with the lamb? In the world as it is, who do you feel like more days than not? If not the lion or the lamb, maybe another character in Isaiah's word picture, the wolf or the leopard or the calf or the cow or the ox or the bear, or the child playing over the rattlesnake pit because you really have no idea how precarious your existence really is. Put another way, what is your place in the world as it is? Are you more like a lion or a lamb? In a church like Myers Park, there are a lot of lions, a lot of alphas, type-A's, apex predators, so to speak. Maybe you identify as a lion in this world. Most days I do. My privilege enables me to define my life, where I go, what I do, who I sit down next to at the bar. Most days I identify with that lion.

As one of your pastors, I know there are also a lot of people here who feel vulnerable to the lions of the world, people whose hearts might be racing a bit when they sit down in the pew next to someone who so clearly seems to be a lion. Sometimes the world can leave you feeling pretty timid, pretty skittish, pretty vulnerable. If it feels like you live in a lion's den, it can leave you feeling like a lamb.

Truth be told, this world feels a lot more like a lion's den than the peaceable kingdom. In the world as it is, lions win, lambs lose; lions eat, lambs get eaten. In the world as it is, bears don't eat grass. In the world as it is, children are bitten by snakes every day. I read in the Observer yesterday that Thursday night, an 11-year-old boy lost his life when he ran into the street by McClintock Middle School to get away from a 12-year-old girl and another 11-year-old boy who were apparently bullying him. Those two children have been charged with involuntary man slaughter. In the world as it is, here in Charlotte, there have been 102 homicides this year. In the world as it is, the realities of poverty and race and social location and concentration of power leave the vast majority of people feeling like sheep and cows and lambs who have absolutely no control over determining their own tomorrow, whose lives are completely subject to the law of the jungle, where only the strong survive and thrive.

Through the prophet, Isaiah, God offers us a vision of a different world, a vision of the peaceable kingdom, a vision of wolves living with lambs, of leopards napping next to baby goats, of calves and cows and carnivores grazing together in the fields, living side by side with children leading the way; a world where hurt and harm and desolation and destruction are no more. I don't know about you, but that's the world my heart longs for.

So how do we get there from here? How do we bridge the way the world is with the way God promises it one day will be? What might it take for the lions of this world to decide not to live according to their instincts? What would it take for lions to stop viewing lambs as food? What would it mean for lions to retract their claws, to choose radicchio instead of rack of lamb? What would it take for lambs to not live in fear of lions? What would it take for those at the bottom of the world's various food chains to not live in constant fear of falling prey to the strong and the powerful?

According to Isaiah, it starts with leadership, with a leader whose DNA springs from King David's gene pool, who is blessed by God's spirit, a spirit of wisdom and understanding and counsel and might, a leader who doesn't base decisions on opinion polls, or by optics, not by what eyes see or ears hear, but whose judgment favors the poor—the lambs of the world, who decides with equity for the meek, for the kid and the calf; who silences the wicked with a word, who wears righteousness like a belt and faithfulness like suspenders. Under this kind of leadership, Isaiah suggests such a world is possible.

As Christians, we do not find this leader in any political figure, nor in any titan of business. This leader is not to be found in executive leadership of non-profits, nor in any pulpit preaching on a Sunday. As Christians, we believe this leader is Jesus of Nazareth, who by faith we call, "The Christ." Jesus has some DNA from the stump of Jesse. Jesus is anointed with the Spirit of the Lord, filled with discerning wisdom, unfailing counsel, and firsthand knowledge of the Almighty. He teaches us, "blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven... blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth, blessed are those who weep, for they will be comforted;" which is to say, blessed are the calves and the kids and cows and the lambs, for in God's world they need not live in fear of the leopards and the lions and the tigers and the bears. That's really good news if you're a lamb. In fact, it's good news for everyone, even for lions.

This vision of God's tomorrow is the hope that inspires us today. This vision is the hope of Advent. In the midst of a world filled with war and rumors of war, polarized by lions, leopards, donkeys and elephants; the church of Jesus Christ, the lion of Judah, the lamb who sits upon the throne, the church, the body of Christ in this broken world is called to embody God's vision for our tomorrow; a day when they will not hurt or destroy on all God's holy mountain; for the kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever. Alleluia! Amen.