

Rev. Dr. Gary Shahinian  
Sermon  
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Park Congregational Church  
Worcester, Massachusetts

“Can the Wolf and the Lamb Ever Get Along?”

Scripture Text: Isaiah 11:1-10

Dear people of God, when Gunther Gebel-Williams retired in 1990 from Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus, he was given the accolade of “The Greatest Wild Animal Trainer of All Time.” Gebel-Williams was famous for doing amazing stunts, especially with tigers. Though they would snarl, scowl, and hiss frightfully, they would always finally obey his commands. It’s not as though this came easily for Gebel-Williams. By the time he retired from the circus, his body was covered with numerous scars. He had received over 500 stitches during the course of his days as an animal trainer as a result of being bitten and clawed.

Our Sermon Lesson this morning, however, speaks of a taming of wild animals that the famed Gunther Gebel-Williams would never attempt to do, namely have the predator and prey lie down beside each other in perfect peace. We are given the vision of the wolf lying down next to the lamb, the leopard lying down with the young goat, the lion

lying down with the calf, and the cow and the bear grazing together. Not only does all of this happen without the expertise of a seasoned animal trainer, a little child is orchestrating this astonishing feat. Toddlers and babies play around the habitat of poisonous snakes and are not harmed. The favorite meal of the ferocious lion is not meat, but rather, straw. This is a vision of what it will be like when the Messiah comes.

How should we understand such a vision? It would be nice to take it literally. Perhaps some of you have seen one of the over hundred versions of the “The Peaceable Kingdom” by Edward Hicks. For many years, various versions of his famous painting hung in the Worcester Art Museum. Hicks was a Quaker, and so, was greatly influenced by that tradition’s pacifism. Over the years as Hicks became more and more disappointed with the conflicts of his age, namely the early 1800s, the predators in his paintings began to look more and more ferocious. Viewing his paintings in chronological order, you notice that the miracle of the millennium looks more and more difficult to believe. Even after painting the splendid vision of Isaiah over a hundred times, at the end of his life, Hicks confessed that he wasn’t satisfied with any of them. Perhaps he was being too hard on himself, since it seems that gazing at any one of

his versions of Isaiah 11 carries one away in a mood of tranquility and harmony.

If only there could come a time when such a vision would truly be the reality on earth! Wouldn't it be wonderful if God's everlasting reign of peace included even the animal kingdom so that "nature, red in tooth and claw" would be replaced by caring and cooperation in nature. What if there would be a time when you could cuddle up to the golden mane of a lion and pet him until it purred? What a glorious delight it would be to observe a gray wolf and a baby lamb feeding together on a grassy hill!

In this present world, such a thing doesn't seem possible. After all, lions cannot digest straw. They must have meat to live. But I nevertheless keep my hopes alive that in some way wild animals too will be part of God's final redemption. I don't hold to these hopes because of any simplistic literal interpretation of the Bible. No, I do so because I take the word of the apostle Paul and other biblical writers seriously when they say that all things will be reconciled to God. Whenever there's a bobcat or a lynx spotted somewhere in Central Massachusetts, I tell Linda that I have first dibs on it as a pet. She then promptly remarks that I still have scars on my hands from our now deceased cat, Choban, who never

even let me pick him up, and I'm going to keep a bobcat as a pet? But I can still hope, can't I? To be honest, there are some animals I would rather share eternity with than persons. Anyway I hold out the hope that our furry friends will indeed join us in the afterlife. Whether or not they will, only God knows.

As for our scripture verses this morning about the wolf living with the lamb and the leopard lying down with the young goat, however, I think God wants us to do more with them than just dream about the future paradise as a petting zoo.

This vision that Isaiah sets before us is not intended to be a wild fantasy. It's not intended to be pure fiction. It's the promise of a radical transformation that will take place in the world. It's a marvelous vision of universal peace that will one day be the norm, and not the aberration. This present world's instruments and agents of death will be remade into instruments and agents of peace. Swords will be beaten into plowshares, fangs and claws will be converted into healing hands, nations will not devour one another, but rather, will be feeding together on God's plentiful bounty. Imagine Adolf Hitler and Josef Goebbels dining with David Ben-Gurion and Golda Meir. Impossible, you say? That's what

people said 30 years ago about Nelson Mandela ever shaking hands with any of South Africa's white Afrikaner leaders. It happened. Transformation came to South Africa. And it happened without a single shot being fired. It truly was a miracle that South Africa dismantled its discriminatory, racist structure of apartheid almost overnight without bloodshed.

Still, you might say, those kinds of stories are few and far between in the violent, belligerent world in which we live where fangs are routinely displayed and so many nations regularly growl and snap at each other. For every South Africa, there's a Syria, Egypt, and Afghanistan. During this Advent season, we don't find the Middle East in peace, but rather in pieces.

Can we really believe in this vision of Isaiah? It's hard to trust in this vision when all around us we see the opposite, even during this Christmas season when shoppers are acting like wild animals, trampling upon one another to get to their game. Woody Allen once said, "The lion and the calf shall lie down together, but the calf won't get much sleep." We know what he means, don't we? Though Christ has called us to pray for peace and to work for peace and to live as peaceably as we can with all

persons, we know very well that the Peaceable Kingdom has not yet come as God intends for it to be and as it one day will surely be.

Where do we start to try to make it come as a reality? Many of us immediately think of the snarling political world as the place to start if the world is going to find a lasting peace. But I think that's going about it backwards. We must start with our own snarling hearts. Carl Sandburg wrote a poem called "Wilderness" in which he said, "There is a wolf in me, fangs pointed for tearing gashes. . . . There is a fox in me. . . . I nose in the dark night and take sleepers and eat them and hide the feathers. . . . There is a baboon in me. . . . There is an eagle in me . . . . O, I got a zoo, I got a menagerie inside my ribs, under my bony head, under my red-valve heart . . . I am the keeper of the zoo . . . ."

The first appointed task of God's Messiah is to come to the bloody zoo in each of us and teach the wolf and the lamb to live together. Christ has come to tame and integrate and harmonize our many warring selves so that a whole self at peace may emerge. Christ once confronted a self-destructive demon-possessed man, a man who howled at night like a beast, and lived like a wild animal among the caves. He asked the man, "What is your name?" The man answered, "My name is Legion, for there

are many of us inside of me” (Mark 5:9). And then Christ drove out what was at war within that man and gave him a right mind. Is there a howling zoo at war within yourself? Allow the peace of God finish its work of taming and integrating all the beasts within you.

It’s not easy. Each of us is different. In some of us, the roaring lion may dominate. We tear at others. We may even tear at ourselves. For reasons that perhaps even we ourselves don’t understand, we lash out at those we love. There’s an untamed aggression in us, a raging appetite to destroy relationships. In others, the passive lamb may rule. We’re timid and afraid. We’re never willing to roar, even when roaring is called for. We live like victims, without the power and courage that Christ supplies. Whichever we are, Christ has come to bring us peace. This peace will integrate all of these characteristics so that they function harmoniously. Christ will take that which is aggressive in us and channel it so that it becomes amiable. Christ will take that which is docile in us and make it bold. Christ comes to us to give us peace. This peace allows the wolf and the lamb within each of us to cohere so that we live as a well-balanced self.

Carol Gilligan is a famous professor of Gender Studies. In her

research, she has discovered that boys and girls often resolve conflicts differently. She talks about one instance she observed in which a girl said to a boy, “Let’s play next-door neighbors.” The boy quickly responded, “I want to play pirates.” The girl replied, “Okay, then you can be the pirate that lives next door!” Gilligan concluded that whereas many boys would think that neighbors and pirates don’t mix, so that the only way to resolve the conflict would be to play pirates for a while and then play neighbors for a while, many girls are more creative. In this case, the pirate would be transformed if he were also a neighbor and the neighborhood might be richer with a pirate next door.

Gilligan doesn’t actually say that girls are by nature more spiritual than boys, but I think that wanting to integrate neighbors and pirates would be the solution that Christ would propose also. Christ wants to integrate the pirate and the neighbor in me and the wolf and the lamb in you. Bringing such apparent opposites together might result in a surprising creative unity. The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, on whose thought I wrote my doctoral dissertation, believed that richer and more intensive experiences come about precisely by unifying such contrasting ideas.

The one who is known as both the Lion of Judah and the Lamb of God can show us how we can achieve such integration of diverse feelings and be at peace within ourselves. In Christ, the wolf and the lamb dwell together. There's room for both. And they get along just fine. One of the mistakes that we make about Christ, and also about ourselves, is that we make him one without the other. To some, God is all lion, all strength, judgment, and wrath, eager and ready to throw people into hell. To others, God is all lamb, all weak, gentle, and meek, allowing us to live in any way we want, never saying a harsh word about our lifestyle. Each by itself is a distortion of the real Jesus Christ. Just like each by itself would be a distortion of our true self. When needed to counter the power of Satan and the demonic realm, Christ roared with judgment and strength. In *The Chronicles of Narnia*, C. S. Lewis wrote of Christ as a lion named Aslan, and one of the characters says about him, "He is wild, you know. Not like a *tame* lion." At the same time, Christ is a gentle lamb who cares for the weak and downtrodden, who forgives all of our sins, who suffers in terrible silence the greatest injustice for our sake, to show us God's love, and goes to his death like a lamb to the slaughter.

Nelson Mandela had to be a roaring lion at times in order to combat

the unjust system of apartheid. But he could also be a gentle lamb when it came time to bring reconciliation in post-apartheid South Africa between the whites and the blacks.

Madeleine L'Engle wrote a children's book entitled, *Dance in the Desert*. It's the story of a young man and woman who long ago traveled in the desert with their child. They traveled with a caravan on their way to Egypt. The desert was filled with ferocious animals. Some of their companions were afraid of the beasts, and especially afraid that the beasts would harm the child. When night came and the people were all sitting around the fire, a great lion appeared at the edge of the camp and everyone was terrified. But the child held out his arms and the lion rose up on its hind legs and, believe it or not, began to dance. And then from the desert came running little mice and two donkeys and three eagles, a snake, many clumsy ostriches, a unicorn, a pelican, and even two dragons. They all bowed to the child and they all danced together around him as he stood at the center and laughed with delight.

You know the name of that child. Let him stand at the center of your desert. Let all the beasts within you bow to him. And when they do, they will learn to dance around him. And the little child shall lead them

(Isaiah 11:6). Amen.