

“Leopard and goat together – yeah right!”

Isaiah 11:1-10

December 8, 2019

It was about 3 ½ years ago, April 2016 that Robin, I, and the rest of the family returned to Ontario to meet and greet our new grandson, Ethan. Not only did we spend time with Scott, Meghan and Ethan we visited friends and the family of Robin’s cousin. We were also able to “squeak” in a visit with Jim and ‘Marjie’, at his retirement banquet. Jim and I both were members of Chedoke, and we both studied at Knox at the same time after our successful first careers. Robin and I were both honoured to have received an invitation to Jim’s retirement.

Jim had a dramatic flair and loved directing the Christmas pageants at his local lodge. He also enjoyed bringing the dramatic to his church services as well. While we were talking to Jim and Marjie before the banquet he told me of one of his earliest Christmases at his church. It seems he wanted to bring the drama he had displayed during his lodge tenure directorship to the church’s Sunday morning Christmas pageant.

The church Jim was ministering at, was located in the rural region outside Kitchener. To aid in the production, Jim put out a call for live animals. I’m not sure why, but the only response he received was from a local farmer who said that Jim could borrow his pig for the service but not for any practices. Jim agreed.

This agreement surprised me, because Jim was such a student of the Jewish testament that he studied Hebrew as his biblical language – you all know I did Greek as did most of the students I knew.

A pig in the stable in Bethlehem? I don’t think many stables in Bethlehem would have had a non-Kosher animal, such as a pig. Not only that, but Jim told me that that pig was huge, so huge in fact that it easily dwarfed Mary, Joseph and the shepherds. It surely would have terrified a real baby Jesus, but the doll was not flustered in the slightest.

Now, what I’m going to say, may confuse, but I’m hoping by the end it will be cleared up completely. You know, I think Jim was biblically correct. Not according to Luke, but according to Isaiah.

Let me explain that last sentence. First of all, Luke doesn’t actually mention any animals at all and neither do any of the other Gospel writers. There – I’ve said it. I hope I didn’t destroy anyone’s Christmas, but despite the best paintings, Christmas cards, and pageants, the bible doesn’t mention an ox, an ass, or even sheep for that matter.

Isaiah, however, does talk about a lot of animals. I’ll grant you, he doesn’t mention a pig, nor does he talk about them being in a stable, but . . .

Okay, at the risk of causing complete and utter confusion, let me start at the beginning. The prophet Isaiah lived in a tumultuous time – a time of war, threat, danger and fear. Sound familiar? He began his ministry in “the year that King Uzziah died” according to Isaiah 6:1, somewhere in the middle of the 8th century BCE. The northern kingdom of Israel had been overtaken by the Assyrians, and Isaiah’s own nation of Judah was being threatened. Things did not look good.

That was not the way life was supposed to be. The people of Israel were living in what they understood to be the promised land. Things were not supposed to go wrong. And yet, they were going terrible wrong.

So in the midst of this, along comes the prophet Isaiah to proclaim a bold and profound message: that there will be a new political order, and the world as we know it, will be transformed into something quite different – and quite wonderful. In other words, there is **hope** beyond our wildest imaginings.

The shoot from the stump of Jesse is the prophet’s way of saying a descendant of David, who had been seen as the ideal king (Jesse being David’s father). This ruler will be filled with God’s Spirit, a spirit of wisdom and understanding, of counsel and might, of knowledge and fear – that is,

awe, not terror – of God. This ruler will judge based not on perceptions, but on righteousness, with justice for the poor and the meek. That is good news!

Over the following centuries, people came to understand this as a prophecy of the Messiah – God’s anointed one – which is why we read the passage during Advent. Did Isaiah have Jesus in mind? Undoubtedly not. And yet, as Christians reading the text on this side of the manger, the cross, and the empty tomb, we cannot help but see in Isaiah’s words a good description of the one we have come to understand as the Messiah. Jesus definitely fit this job description well.

The second half of the proclamation is perhaps even more intriguing, as Isaiah paints an amazing picture of all sorts of animals living in surprising harmony. Wolf and lamb lying down together. Cow and bear grazing together. **Leopard and goat**, a child and a poisonous snake – in short, former enemies becoming friends and finding ways to coexist in glaring defiance of the apparent laws of nature. All because “the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea” (Isa. 11:9b).

Led by a little child.

Again, reading this a few weeks before Christmas, we cannot help but see parallels to Jesus, and the reign of peace we long for so desperately being brought into our world through the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Christ.

It is a wonderful vision, beyond words. It has been depicted in paintings by numerous artists. It is one of the most well-known passages of scripture, expressing a universal **hope** for peace and justice.

This idea of hope for peace and justice, can be written off as idealism so easily by some. It’s easy for us to think this isn’t going to happen. Santa Claus isn’t going to come down the chimney, either. Nice idea, but not realistic – right?

Except. Except, we ought to believe it.

Theologian Marcus Borg, in his book *The Heart of Christmas*, talks about what it means **to believe**. He points out that the Latin word *credo*, from which we get “creed” means “I commit my loyalty or allegiance to” **something**.

This proclamation of Isaiah’s is something we are invited to commit our allegiance to, to sink the teeth of our faith into, to believe in because it is good news and is not beyond the reach of reality. Because, if we believe that God has come to be among us, in the form of Jesus of Nazareth, and if we believe that in some form or another the risen Christ is present among us even now, then it is not far-fetched to believe that God can and will bring about harmony, peace, justice, and hope that the world so desperately needs and craves.

Not overnight. And perhaps not literally in the way that Isaiah portrays. But I believe it. I dare dream it, and I commit my loyalty to it.

It began to come true with a baby in a manger. And with a man who ate with those who the world called sinners, who invited children to sit with him, and who called a woman who was bent over, a child of Abraham. It continued with one who healed on the Sabbath in defiance of religious leaders, and invites all of us to sit at a table together, just as we did last week, as one great family.

I’d like to finish the story I began with about my friend Jim. After the banquet Jim and Marjie invited us back to their house to continue our visit as we enjoyed a night cap before our return to Hamilton. Jim told me that he continued to place a pig in his manger scene, until his retirement. He did this, he said, as a little reminder of the wondrous hope of God’s promise in this vision, which we celebrate in this season. To the world it may not make sense. And yet, in God’s world, Jim thought it made perfect sense.