

## ***And a little child shall lead them***

Based on Isaiah 11:1-10

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

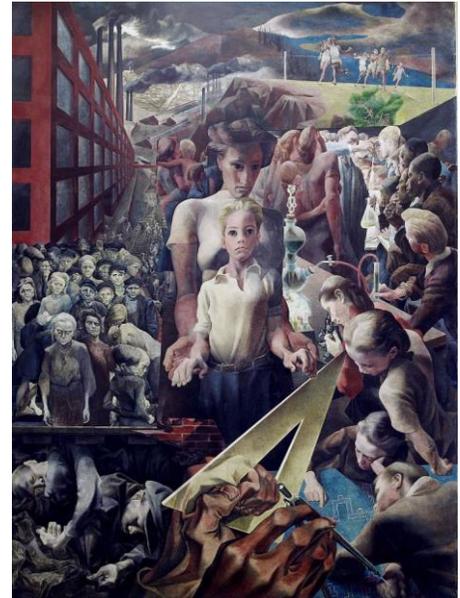
December 8, 2019

by Rev. Dave Le Grand

In 1938 the Public Works Arts Project began funding 61 murals to be installed in the Department of Justice building in Washington D.C. Each mural revealed a vision of what justice in America should or could look like; the one you see behind me was created by artist Symeon Shimin, a Russian born immigrant to Brooklyn, entitled "Contemporary Justice and The Child".

Here we see through the eyes of an immigrant, from the left the brokenness of America where justice is absent, with haunting eyes of masses of the poor in shades of gray. Moving to the right side we see construction of a justice-filled land, noticing brown hands holding the construction tools – African Americans still then did not have the right to vote. We see women and men alongside one another and people of diverse skin colour. a child's vision of what is just and unjust.

Isaiah's vision, we heard this morning, is not for realists. One Bible scholar observes that, "with the exception of the white dove, it would be difficult to come up with a more iconic image of future peace than that of a lion lying down with a lamb."<sup>1</sup> Did anyone pick up the humour in that observation? You see, Isaiah never talked about a "lion" lying down with a "lamb".



We do, however, hear of other absurd pairings On God's Holy Mountain where: the *wolf* shall live with the lamb,... the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.<sup>2</sup> A little child shall lead them, the prophet says.

Ok, ok, a few of you might be thinking, "A child leading the world towards powerful peace? That seems a bit idealistic." After all, brilliant people have been working on peace negotiations, and we *still* don't see any substantial peace! How is a child going to lead us towards peace?

So, what is the significance of that: A child shall lead them? What do you think? For all of you are theologians (theology as "talking about God stuff") around me today. The ancient prophet Isaiah describes God's Holy Mountain with its absurd pairings of predators and prey coexisting in peace – but *a little child shall lead them?*

It is an extraordinary picture of hope. It may even sound like a fairy tale, but the prophet clearly feels that this hopeful picture will come. Evil empires crumbling and disappearing. (How is that vision working out?) It may well seem like the noble leaders

<sup>1</sup> Stacey Simpson Duke, Pastoral Perspective. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Year A, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.*

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 11: 6

are disappearing, but...but, look, there is a stump of hope. Actually, it is a tree, with shoots growing from it – there is life!

The context of this passage, scholars say, is a war, and King Ahaz of Judah was asked to join forces with the northern kingdom of Israel. Isaiah advised King Ahaz not to accept that alliance – imagine, a prophet is not always out in the wilderness being ignored by the most powerful leaders! Ahaz listened to the prophet Isaiah; he didn't accept, but he instead turned to the Assyrian empire for help, and the results were devastating.

These were grim times, and the tone of Isaiah's vision implies that he didn't anticipate the "anointed" one, a king, emerging within his lifetime. But the vision is clear; **Some day**, perhaps soon, God's reign, Yahweh's kin-dom vision would come.

Last week I spoke of expectancy in Advent. Our world unfortunately teaches our children, and us, unrealistic, unhealthy expectations for ourselves and our world. For people of faith, though, those of us who dare to believe there is power at the heart of Scriptures, we are offered treasure, hope, wrapped up in these Advent visions of peace. But we must be willing to mine the depth of the symbolism in these rich biblical passages, and, we must look deep within our souls – those places of yearning, of hoping, buried under layers of skepticism.

The LeGrand family van has taken us across the country, but, last week, alas, it died. I'm actually embracing the opportunity for a simpler lifestyle. Taking the bus to Sudbury offers me space and time that previously I had not known. Of course, visiting grandparents out of town will present our family with tough choices as we have to fit our luggage in a much smaller vehicle.

My daughter, in her wisdom, has earnestly taken to Google to help; she is certain that we can afford a new or gently used van, and, as such presents me with what she sees as perfectly realistic prospects. Now, I could shrug off my children as idealistic, thinking: What could Isaiah or God be thinking, placing a child at the lead of a kin-dom project like peace on earth?

But then, more careful observation of Sophia and all the kids around us reveals how wise and wonderful children can be. Equip children, give them space to express themselves, their dreams & what breaks their hearts, and I think we all can learn that deep within our children are all the tools God needs to usher in peace.

Recall Malala Yousafzai tenaciously holding up a vision of girls in Afghanistan being encouraged to go to school. That was absurd, even heretical, to Taliban men who tried take away her voice and those of women and children. How about Autumn Peltier of Wikwemikong - only in grade 9, yet she is already a veteran activist and held in great esteem by her elders as a "water protector".<sup>3</sup> There are, in fact, countless United Church youth in leadership today. Often I hear adults talking proudly of our youth, saying, "Maybe so-and-so will be Moderator one day."

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<sup>3</sup> CBC news story, September 28, 2019. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/canadian-indigenous-water-activist-autumn-peltier-addresses-un-on-clean-water-1.5301559>

I hope my friend and present Moderator Richard Bott won't be offended, but musing aloud here, I wonder if titles and elected positions can sometimes undermine our greatest power, and our ability to be messengers of God's visions. Prophets and activists who speak truth to power are less like "mighty trees", and instead, more like that "tiny shoot" in Isaiah's vision. Seemingly powerless individuals and networks in our world today speaking holy visions that resonate powerfully in the hearts of people. If there is a prevailing narrative of our biblical stories, it is the small, seemingly insignificant, people being chosen by our Creator to accomplish amazing things.

Like foreigners inexplicably compelled to leave creature comforts to forge out to a strange land following a star. All those Three knew was that a baby would soon be born that would change the world. Absurd stories that captivate us and touch our hearts deeply.

...and a child shall lead them.

May we hold this message close to our hearts as Mary surely did. Amen.