

## Hope in a Land of Stumps

Isaiah 11:1-10

Matthew 3:1-12

Through the centuries the Christian church has been keen to talk about salvation. When it has done it has tended to talk about salvation in terms of human beings being sinful creatures who need someone to save them from their sins so they can go to heaven and spend eternity with God, rather than going to hell and spending eternity with the devil. Well, I guess that's fine as far as it goes, but what about life in this world? What about all the social systems we human beings create that are also sinful? Doesn't God care about the earth, not just heaven? Doesn't God care about people living their every day lives on this planet, rather than looking at people solely as possible future inhabitants of heaven? I believe the answer to these later questions is a resounding YES! As Christians we need to include this earth and the people living on it, now and in the future, in our understanding of salvation, because the God of the Bible certainly does.

This becomes abundantly clear in our passage today from Isaiah 11. Heaven is not even mentioned. The focus is totally on earth. The focus is on the political and social system being redeemed so that the poor and the lowly will receive fair treatment in the courts and political system. No longer will only the rich and powerful have access to the halls of political power. No longer will the social system be rigged in their favor.

Redemption will not only come to the political and social systems but to the whole ecology. Not only will peace and justice reign supreme in the human community but the whole ecology of the earth will move from "survival of the fittest" to **"They will not hurt and destroy on all my holy mountain."**

The ancient prophet of God comes up with these striking pairings of animals in his vision of the peaceable kingdom. **“The 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. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion eat straw like the ox.”** These words still resonate with us today. They still move us and cause us to imagine a different world from the one we know.

Now there are two things I would like us to notice about this wonderful vision of a new world. First, since this was written around the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. All the pairings reflect human beings fear of the “dangers” of nature. Being an agricultural/pastoral economy farmers lived in fear of wolves eating their lambs, of leopards eating their baby goats, of lions eating their calves, of bears killing their cows and needless to say their children wandering around the farm and being bitten by a poisonous snake. It is not surprising that their vision of a better world would be one in which nature would not pose a threat to them and how they made a living.

Now let’s fast forward into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. After 25 centuries it shouldn’t surprise us that this vision of a better world could use some updating. Today most of the world’s population does not need to fear wild animals, certainly not to the degree our biblical cousins did. Today it is nature that has reason to fear humanity.

Let’s look at that list of animals again from Isaiah 11. Israel and the Fertile Crescent still have lots of goats, cows, oxen and sheep. What you will not find are any bears, leopards, or lions and I doubt if there are many wolves! Human beings have killed them off either directly or by altering and taking over their habitat. This story has been repeated and is being repeated all over the world as humankind continues to plunder Mother Earth.

The extinction rate of plants and animals is climbing rapidly. Pollution is poisoning the air and water and the effects of our fossil fuel economy is helping to heat up the planet, with potentially disastrous results for generations to come.

I've continued to read this Advent season Brian McClaren's book *Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises and a Revolution of Hope*. As he considered all the monumental problems the world faces today: war, poverty, injustice, ecological disaster, etc. he consulted with another well known Christian, Leonard Sweet. As the two of them talked about these crises and how they seem to be inextricably interlocked with each other, Leonard Sweet said, **"It's like we've created some sort of suicide machine."**

McClaren, through his research, found that others were using similar language to describe our world situation today. Jared Diamond, in **Guns, Germs, and Steel**, found that some ancient cultures **"committed ecological suicide by destroying their own resource base."** Easter Island is one such culture. David Korten, in *The Great Turning*, has spoken of what he describes as the **"suicidal corporate economy."** Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff wrote on the very first page of his 1995 masterpiece, *Cry of the earth, Cry of the Poor*, **"A death machine is mowing down life in its most varied forms."** Later in the same book he spoke of a societal **"killing machine"** and **"the predatory and lethal machinery of our model of society and development."** (*Everything Must Change*, p. 52-53)

Now some of you may be thinking that so far this doesn't sound much like your idea of an Advent sermon and maybe it's not a very traditional Advent sermon at that, but it is a sermon about crisis and a vision of hope. Crisis and hope, now that is very much an advent theme. **"They shall 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.”** (Isaiah 11:9)

The crisis in Isaiah’s time was that the glorious legacy of King David seemed to be long gone. No longer was Israel a force to be reckoned with. No longer did it control its own destiny. The family tree of King David had produced a series of bad kings who had made some terrible political decisions and who just plain were caught up and crushed in the power struggles of the day. Israel had been conquered. The temple destroyed. The people exiled. Their kings humiliated and killed. The family tree of David was nothing more than a stump. All hope seemed to be gone. There was no one left to take the throne of David and lead Israel back to the glory days of old.

In a time when the people of Israel feared both the people around them and nature a vision of the peaceable kingdom comes to them from Isaiah. T **“A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.”** (Isaiah 11:1) **“They shall not hurt and destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”** (Isaiah 11:9) This was truly a vision of hope amidst the stumps.

One of the great prophets of our time was Dr. Seuss. In his book *The Lorax* he warns humanity about an economy that despoils nature instead of working with nature. He presents us with an almost Garden of Eden world, **“Way back in the days when the grass was still green and the pond was still wet and the clouds were still clean, and the song of the Swomee-Swans rang out in space...one morning, I came to this glorious place. And I first saw the trees! The Truffula Trees! The bright colored tufts of the Truffula Trees! Mile after mile in the fresh morning breeze. And**

**under the trees, I saw Brown Bar-ba-loots frisking about in their Bar-ba-loot suits as they played in the shade and ate Truffula Fruits. From the rippulous pond came the comfortable sound of the Humming-Fish humming while splashing around.”**

Well you know how the story goes. The Oncelers come and cut down the trees to feed the factories to make Thneeds to meet all their needs. It is into this situation that the prophetic Lorax comes and warns the Oncelers that this can not go on. In response to this warning the Onceler yells, **“Now listen here Dad! All you do is yap-yap and say ‘Bad! Bad! Bad! Bad!’ Well I have my rights, sir, and I’m telling you I intend to go on doing just what I do! And for your information, you Lorax, I’m figgering on biggering and BIGGERING AND BIGGERING, turning more Truffula Trees into Thneeds which everyone, EVERYONE, EVERYONE needs!”**

Not surprisingly, the environment is destroyed. Every last Truffula Tree is cut down. All we see at the end of the book are miles and miles of stumps and a sky full of smog. The prophetic Lorax departs but he leaves behind one word written in stone, **“UNLESS.”**

The last Onceler is telling this story of what has happened to his land to a young boy. Seuss concludes his prophetic book in this way, **“But now,” says the Once-ler, ‘Now that you’re here, the word of the Lorax seems perfectly clear. UNLESS someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It’s not.’** With this final word the Once-ler tosses down the very last Truffula Tree seed and tells the boy to plant it tend it carefully, **“Give it clean water. And feed it fresh air. Grow a forest. Protect it from axes that hack. Then the Lorax and all of his friends**

**may come back.”** Like Isaiah, this is another story of hope among the stumps!

God gave us a beautiful world to live in. There is food and water, enough for everyone. We human beings can learn to live within the means that the planet provides. We can learn to live in such a way that we do not destroy the world around us and all of its creatures in our efforts to meet our real needs. This vision of a “peaceable kingdom” can come to pass if we “care enough.”

I was watching Nightline a couple of nights ago. One of the stories was about the orangutans of Borneo. They are facing extinction because people are clear cutting the jungles to provide wood for furniture and homes. But one woman is doing her best to reverse this trend. She left her job as an airline stewardess 15-20 years ago to start a refuge for orangutans in Borneo. She takes in orphaned and injured orangutans and the refuge has several hundred at this point. She is also working with the Borneo government to try and set up parks and sanctuaries. She thought she had one set aside but it was later sold to a paper company. Clearly she cares and she is lifting up a vision of hope in a land of stumps.

God grant that we all learn to care enough to be part of the forces of hope amid a world of stumps. **“They 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.”** Amen.

