

The Promise of Peace

Isaiah 11: 1-10

Philippians 4: 1-11

Last Sunday morning, my iPhone told me that my weekly screen time was down by 37%. That's good I thought; less doom-scrolling through Facebook, less time on Google looking up meaningless factoids and less compulsive message checking. More time for living, walking the Labradors; more energy for important relationships.

Decades ago, a former physicist named Michael Goldhaber popularized the concept of the attention economy, a space where “*one is never not on, at least when one is awake, since one is nearly always paying, getting or seeking attention.*”¹ Our attention is one of our most valuable resources, and everyone wants a piece of it: politicians and advertisers, influencers and friends, and yes, dear Charlotte, even your church! We know advertisers are paying for our attention and that social media networks are savvy at capturing it for profit. More of us at every age are more addicted to the Internet than ever before, thanks to the way the pandemic collapsed our worlds into the glowing rectangles of our handheld devices. The consensus seems to be that the attention economy is inevitable and inescapable, and that it is responsible for the ongoing disintegration of truth and civility in our culture.²

David Foster Wallace once famously quipped, “Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship.” If worship is a form of attention, it appears that many of us are actually worshipping our phones. It's difficult to bear the contradiction of Sunday mornings when we worship God on the device we've been tricked into worshipping. The social media content we are uploading to our church platforms cannot compete with TikTok. So the old hymn bears great wisdom for those of us who inhabit this attention economy: “Turn your eyes upon Jesus.” If we are to be worshippers of God, followers of Christ and members of the church, we need to continually redirect our attention upon those things, numinous and ordinary alike, that point us toward the in-breaking reign of God. We have to teach ourselves again to dwell in God's presence. We need to cultivate a holy imagination that defeats the temptation to check our iPhones for new notifications; we need to be neighbors and friends before being consumers. We need to immerse ourselves again in Holy Scripture, even if it lags behind what is trending on Twitter.

¹ “I Talked to the Cassandra of the Internet Age,” Charlie Warzel. New York Times, Opinion, Feb. 4, 2021.

² “It Takes Faith To Resist The Attention Economy.” Christian Century, Katherine Willis Pershey July 28, 2021

To behold is to become beholden to, I believe, and to be beholden to these ancient texts from Isaiah grounds us in a different reality than, say, Instagram. To be beholden to God connects us with a form of holy imagination that inscribes different rhythms in our psyche and describes how our world might be more generous, more just and more sustainable. In 578 C.E. the leaders of a Byzantine church in Ma'in, Madaba, Jordan, were so beholden to the work of God in their lives that when they built a church building, they laid a beautiful mosaic tile carpet in the church entryway, the narthex, full of the images and phrases of Scripture from Genesis, Exodus and Isaiah. The most prominent inscription that each worshipper had to walk over on entering the sanctuary was this fantastical phrase describing the peaceable kingdom from Isaiah 11:

*The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;
and a little child will lead them. Isaiah 11:6*

Just to walk into church was to pay attention to this vision of God on what the future might behold, the picture of a peaceable kingdom, with predators and prey living side by side, and children playing unharmed near poisonous snakes.³ Woody Allen once quipped about this vision: “*The wolf shall lie down with the lamb. But the lamb won’t get much sleep!*” If we were to inscribe a Biblical text on the new floor of a refreshed sanctuary in a few years, what would our inscription say?

But just to back up a little bit; it’s helpful to imagine Isaiah 11 as a Netflix series. The first episode depicts a young king: vital, alive, strong, decisive, serene, and bearing an exuberant joy about his job as a leader. Surrounding him is an air of wisdom that is beyond his years. On the hill behind him, ancient monarchs lie dead, cruel and ugly. Nearby is a gathering of the poor and vulnerable, whose faces are lifted up and radiant with hope. The second episode shows a fantastic gathering of beasts and children, none of whom should be standing next to each other. There are the sleek, powerful carnivores at the top of the food pyramid; leopard, wolf, lion, bear while the domestic animals stand close by...calf, ox, lamb and goat. The predators and their potential prey are hanging out together in a visual parable of peaceable-ness. And, a child sings aloud to them as a toddler plays over the nests of deadly snakes. The title of the first show, Justice and the second one, Peace.⁴

Isaiah 11 is worthy of our attention for it presents a pair of compelling images of what our future might look like through the eyes of God whose goal was creating a better, more livable planet. The challenges facing our world, our nation, our church are massive, overwhelming; a growing population –10 billion people on this planet by 2050, almost double what it was in 2020; increasing inequality; environmental pressures; enormous technological shifts; a rise in authoritarian governance; and volatile economic conditions.⁵

The first episode opens like this: “*A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse. . .*” The stump is dead. God had said it would be so. Just before this chapter, God declares punishment on the people of Israel: “the tallest trees will be cut down and the lofty will be brought low.” The trees, the people — both will be clean cut

³ Art Destination, Jordan Church of the Apostles, Ma'in, Madaba, Jordan. <https://universes.art/en/art-destinations/jordan/madaba/church-of-the-apostles>

⁴ Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds. (Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, 2010), Isaiah 11:1-11, Paul S. Duke, p. 27.

⁵ This Could be Our Future: A Manifesto for a More Generous World, Yancey Strickler. (New York, Penguin Books, 2019), p.14.

off. And yet, another word comes from the very same prophet: “*A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse . . .*” (Isaiah 11:1).

While out on our walks, many of us have noticed the tiny green flower growing in a tiny crack in the pavement, or the evergreen trees that have taken root on the side of a mountain. The poet Mary Oliver explores this image of a shoot emerging impossibly from a stump for us. In her poem, “Praying,” she observes:

*It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention.⁶*

“Just some weeds in a vacant lot.” “*A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse . . .*” In that green sprig I saw something else along the path: *a tiny seedling pushing out into the sunlight*. There are, I know, scientific explanations why such a thing is possible, yet each time I saw it, that dogged shoot appeared to me a miracle, a doorway to something greater.

The second scene in this Netflix drama describes a peaceable kingdom that’s so lovely that it almost makes us weep with longing for it. It’s so exquisite that it captivated the imagination of the nineteenth century American painter, Edward Hicks, who painted more than 60 different interpretations. Hicks interpreted Isaiah’s striking word picture of predators and prey living in peaceful harmony. The wolf lives with the lamb. Leopards lie down with goats. Calves and lions lie together. And a little child leads all of them. It’s no wonder that in Hick’s picture, the animals’ eyes are wide open, as though perpetually amazed.

God created you and me to live in peace with God, each other and the rest of his creation. The Lord meant for the foundations of peace – righteousness and justice – to fill God’s whole creation. God even calls God’s Son, Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace. Isaiah 11 reminds us that while we live in a violent world, God will not rest until peace captures the attention of all people and nations. God won’t stop making peace until all predators and prey, as well as all enemies, live together in peace.

But in the meantime there is Iraq, Afghanistan, North Korea, the Taliban, the Proud Boys, and Boko Haram. In the meantime internal strife threatens to destroy countries like Ukraine and Ethiopia. Political turmoil roils countries as diverse as the United States and Venezuela.

⁶ “Praying,” Thirst: Poems by Mary Oliver. Mary Oliver. (Beacon Press, Boston, 2006), p. 37.

In our politically charged atmosphere, it is clear that people are looking for a leader who will capture their attention. So, what is it that you are looking for in a leader? Are you looking for strength or compassion, toughness or tenderness, intellectual prowess or emotional intelligence? Will you be attracted by a fresh new platform, a set of world-changing promises, or an experienced leader who has demonstrated skills? Does age matter, or gender, or upbringing, or church membership? Will the person's piety make a difference to you, or will you focus on political savvy? Are you looking for someone who will pursue your particular interests, or for someone who has a vision far beyond your own personal concerns? Will you accept someone who has the right ideas, or someone who is personally righteous? What are you looking for in a leader?

Isaiah focuses our attention on what a leader might look like: *"A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse..."* Who could imagine anything growing as they sat on the stump of utter despair? I've sat there myself, perhaps you have, too. You may be there now — at that place where hope is cut off, where loss and despair have deadened your heart.

God's word comes to sit with us in this season of Annual Giving to refocus our attention on the heart of generosity. The prophet's vision is surprising, but small. The shoot that was growing would be different from what the people expected:

*For he grew up before them like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
(Isaiah 53: 2)*

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse... fragile yet tenacious and stubborn. It would grow like a plant out of dry ground. It would push back the stone from the rock-hard tomb. What if we believe this fragile sign is God's beginning? Perhaps then we will tend the seedling in our hearts; the place where faith longs to break through the hardness of our disbelief. Do not wait for the tree to be full grown. God comes to us in this fall season and invites us to move beyond counting the rings of the past. We may still want to sit on the stump for a while, and God will sit with us. But God will also keep nudging us: "Look! Look! Pay attention! — There on the stump. Do you see that green shoot growing?"

*O come, green shoot of Jesse, free
Your people from despair and apathy;
Forge justice for the poor and the meek,
Grant safety for the young ones and the weak.*

Rejoice, rejoice! Take heart and do not fear, God's chosen one, Jesus the Christ, draws near.

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