

Isaiah 11 – The Peaceable Kingdom

Most of my questions about these passages from the Old Testament prophets have to do with time.

Is this vision supposed to reflect something in the past? Or is it something that will happen in the future, at the end of time? Is it something we'll likely never see in our lifetime? Or something we can see now? Are we supposed to be doing something about it now? Or just trust that God is doing it?

The weird thing about the prophets is that the answer to all of those questions is yes. Biblical time is not linear time. On the other hand, our minds work in linear time.

Our minds also work in either/or mode when passages like this are almost always both/and. So, if we're to get out anything out of Advent and the Advent readings, we have to get out of our usual way of thinking. We have to be time travelers who can be in three different times at the same time.

Let's get started on our time journey. We're going to start in the past because that's where those who first heard this lived.

The chapter right before this is filled with frightening images of war and destruction. The prophet Isaiah tells the people that Assyria is God's judgment on God's people.

OK, quiz time – what were the two things Isaiah and all the prophets said God was judging them for?

Right – Idolatry and injustice. Especially injustice against the poor.

Here's a little snippet from chapter 10:

Doom to those who pronounce wicked decrees,
and keep writing harmful laws
2 to deprive the needy of their rights
and to rob the poor among my people of justice;
to make widows their loot;
to steal from orphans!

But in that same chapter, Isaiah also tells the people that Assyria too will be judged by God. They too will fall because they attacked God's people.

Chapter 10 ends with a vision of a forest, leveled by axe and fire.

Then in an abrupt 180, we get the beautiful passage we read today. Out of one of those chopped down trees, a shoot will come. Out of desolation will come new life. Out of despair will come hope.

As Christians, we are very quick to jump to Jesus as the one Isaiah is speaking of. But Isaiah prophesied hundreds of years before Jesus. We don't actually know who those original listeners thought this referred to. They probably believed that a king of the times would be it. Some eventually related this to King Hezekiah, who did enact many reforms.

Of course, now we know Hezekiah's reign didn't accomplish this beautiful vision of peace. As time went on, the people began to look for a new messiah. As king after king failed, hope was put onto some future yet unknown king.

But this image nonetheless inspired hope. If God promised this, then it's going to happen. Hope has a powerful impact in the present, even if it still looks to the future.

So, we move from Isaiah to Bethlehem, 700 some years later. A peasant couple welcomes their new little one in a stable manger. Shepherds and farm animals are his first witnesses.

That's not how a king should be born. They're supposed to be born in fine homes with soft robes and a cozy cradle. But centuries of that kind of king never did bring about this world that Isaiah described. Is it possible this one could?

Jesse was King David's father. The promise was always that David's family would hold the throne. After the events that unfolded in the time of the prophets, they did not.

Jesus was from David's line. So much pointed to Jesus as this new ruler. Surely now this beautiful vision would come true.

Thing is, there have always been folks who don't want this kind of kingdom. The kind of kingdom Isaiah describes means sharing power and wealth.

It means not seeking revenge. It means humble worship.

It means bringing up the lowly and taking down the powerful. Those who wanted to maintain the kind of kingdom that kept them in power couldn't let that happen.

So they killed Jesus.

Here's where time gets really wonky. Jesus doesn't stay dead. At that time, people did believe in resurrection of the dead, but thought it was way off in the future...the end of the age.

Instead, in a stunning act, God brought that future crashing into their own time. And what's even weirder is that it crashes into our time too.

And yet we still wait, hoping that God's promise will yet come true. The incarnation and resurrection of Jesus bring past, present, and future together.

So, we live in a time when the past incarnation, death and resurrection assure the fulfillment of this promise of a peaceable kingdom. We look to the future when it will become a complete reality.

But what about now? War grinds on in Ukraine. Two thirds of Africa is experiencing either civil war or a terrorist insurgency or both.

There are still too many who seek to lead in such a way that serves only the rich at the expense of the ordinary workers and the poor.

Is there any evidence that Isaiah's vision isn't just a pipe dream? Is there a way this is actually at least partially true in some way? The answer is yes. Where do you see it?

You see it where people have turned their back on a life of consumerism and excess for a life of simplicity, service, and prayer.

You see it when people give up a desire for retaliation, and instead work for reconciliation.

You see it when a group of Christians chooses to live in community in a poor neighborhood...where instead of practicing charity, they actually share each other's burdens.

You see it when someone gives up the chance at fame and wealth to serve among the poorest of the poor.

Living as though Isaiah's vision is already true requires giving up something. It requires the death of a way of living that relies on power and wealth...a way of life that that's too often steeped in violence.

But it does happen.

Mother Teresa's community in Calcutta India is a well-known one. Another I've mentioned is the Simple Way, a community of Christians living in a poor neighborhood in Philadelphia.

But what about us? Maybe we're not ready to give up our own comfort completely. I confess I'm not.

And other than by using our voice and vote in our democratic process, we can't in this time and place bring about God's vision for the world. There is a future element to this, and yes we do have to wait for God's good future to unfold. That's what this Advent waiting is all about.

But we can find at least small ways to live this vision.

I don't know who all reads the comics in the newspaper – or even the newspaper. I still do, although it's an e-edition.

Pearls Before Swine is one of the comics in the Lincoln Journal Star. How many of you know this one?

Two of the main characters are Rat and Pig. Rat is a cynical, self-absorbed character. Pig is portrayed as a naïve innocent who sometimes opts to stay in bed rather than face the ugliness of the world.

So, the strip starts with Rat asking Pig, What do you do when a driver cuts you off? Swear at them? Make a rude gesture? Cut them off in return?

Pig says, I try to focus on what must be happening in their life to make them so hostile and unhappy.

Rat says, I don't think you're understanding

Pig – no, but I'm trying to be.

That's a micro-sized version of Isaiah's vision. And it's pretty doable in the here and now. If even all Christians approached things that way, more of this vision could unfold in the present, even though we still wait.

But even something that small isn't easy. Driving is a sort of spiritual barometer for me. I know how well I'm doing spiritually by how I react to bad driving. Or even slow driving.

Most of us don't conjure up that kind of peace and understanding on our own. We need peace in our own hearts...peace with ourselves...to have the kind of peace that overflows.

We may still wait for the final fulfillment of Isaiah's vision. We can trust that even now, in our prayer, our worship, our reading of scripture, and our community, Jesus comes to us to bring just such a peace...a peace that can change the world.

