

Root of Jesse
Isaiah 11:1-10

Do you have your holiday tree up yet? How about your holiday lights? It's a bit early yet, but will you soon start greeting people by saying, "Happy Holidays!"?

Our Christmas tree is up and decorated, and there are Christmas lights on our house. In a couple weeks I will begin greeting people by saying, "Merry Christmas!"

Calling them holiday trees and holiday lights and saying, "Happy Holidays!" is a not so subtle way of trying to take Christ out of Christmas. But we know that without Jesus there would be no Christmas. He is the central figure.

He is also the central figure of our reading from Isaiah. Without Him a wolf playing with a lamb and a calf carousing with a lion is just a fanciful myth. But with Christ at the center, this poetic picture becomes our reality here and now. In Christ, the Kingdom of Peace Isaiah pictured is here and now.

If we understand the context, we will better understand vegetarian lions and domesticated bears. In the very first verse, Isaiah says that *there shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse*. Isaiah is pointing forward to Christmas. The line of Jesse, King David's father, had been reduced to a stump. At the birth of Jesus, new and eternal life springs up from this stump.

On this same Jesus, the Spirit of the Lord rests. Isaiah writes: *And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel*

and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. Jesus, the Son of David, went forth "full of the Spirit" and manifested Himself before all Israel. At His Baptism, the Spirit of God descended on Him like a dove and came to rest on Him.

On Jesus rests the Spirit of wisdom and understanding. During His earthly ministry, He demonstrated a wisdom which had been hidden from the beginning of the world. Jesus spoke and gave insight into heavenly things which only He knows.

On Jesus rests the Spirit of counsel and might. By His suffering and death, David's Son, broke the bonds which held people captive and overcame our enemies of sin, death, and the devil.

And on Jesus rests the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. He was obedient to His Father's will, even unto death. Now through the Spirit, the Lord plants the knowledge of God – the fear and love of God – in our hearts.

His work completed, the Son of David now sits on the throne of His Father. "*And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins.*"

Christ bears the scepter of peace, not judging by what His eyes see or deciding by what His ears hear, but with righteousness. To troubled sinners, Christ gives justice. He makes poor, miserable sinners right with God by covering our sin and presenting us blameless to God the Father.

At the same time, those who reject the scepter of this king are put to shame. They see His glory, but behold it not in fear and love – just fear. They will receive the punishment they deserve for rejecting Him. As Isaiah puts it, *He shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.*

This is what the first five verses of our reading are about. Some 750 years before it happened, Isaiah foretells the coming of Jesus, the King of peace. What Isaiah now goes on to describe is the kingdom of peace.

We tend to read what Isaiah writes and think it is a heavenly vision – sometime off in the future. The reality is that this holy time has already come! Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of Mary, has come. His name and His cross have been set up as a sign on the earth. It is visible everywhere. Those near and far have salvation and peace preached to them. The nations acknowledge it. They confess that in no other is salvation to be found, that no other name under heaven is given by which they must be saved. They come and kneel before the crucified Christ.

This is not true of everyone. But many do come – from all peoples and lands. They come to the manger in Bethlehem, to the cross at Golgotha, and find peace and rest for their souls.

Isaiah describes what this peace and rest we find in Jesus looks like. *The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain.*

In the kingdom of Christ, there is no evil. Those who acknowledge the Lord renounce the works of the devil. And although we still sin, there is an ever-flowing fountain of mercy. Day to day, we receive from Christ forgiveness of sins, as well as peace and strength for all good works.

This is what Isaiah means when he says the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and so on. This is no fairy tale. Nor is it primarily a description of what eternal life will be like. This is the kingdom of grace in which we live now!

This is what the Church looks like now! These scenes from the natural world picture the peace that the Christian Church enjoys right now. It stands in sharp contrast to the world's lack of peace, its continual conflict and war, where everyone looks to take advantage of his neighbor, where people do not know the way of peace, are quick to shed innocent blood, and have poison on their lips.

Lions eating straw and wolves lying down with lambs?! The Gospel makes possible even greater things! The wild beasts are a picture of how human beings really are—just as given

to sin by nature as a wolf is to eating meat. But a lion deciding to go vegetarian is nothing compared to God taking us sinful human beings, releasing us from the guilt of all our sin, and giving us a heart that no longer wants to sin but wants to do only the will of God!

As new creatures in Christ, this is exactly what has happened to us. God has created in us new hearts so that, while sin still clings to us, we do want to please God and serve our neighbors. This is completely unnatural from the perspective of our old sinful selves!

The disciples who out of fear abandoned Jesus in His hour of need did what came naturally. But transformed by the power of the resurrection and by the risen Jesus' own word to them, "Peace be with you," they went on to suffer persecution and imprisonment and even martyrdom for the sake of His name. You and I likewise have been transformed by the Holy Spirit, making us into the kind of people we would never be without Him.

We are washed daily in the blood of the Lamb and are made a new creatures. We who believe in Christ lay aside our wild nature and daily strive to stifle our inborn bitterness and jealousy. With the help of the Spirit, instead of harming one another, we do good.

This peace will be perfected in the world to come. But the kingdom of peace has come already, just as surely as the King of peace has come already and now lives and reigns to all eternity. Amen. Come Lord, Jesus.