

Jon Hauerwas – November 13, 2016 – “A Vision of Peace”
Isaiah 12:2-6 and Isaiah 65:17-25

Several weeks ago, we talked about sheep and shepherding language in the Bible. During the Time for Young Disciples, I held up a stuffed sheep, spoke about that animal’s particular vulnerabilities, and insisted that a good shepherd is responsible for protecting the innocent flock. Among the greatest dangers, I suggested, is the wolf – because wolves eat sheep. And then, right on cue, the children’s eyes enlarged.

It is right, I think, to teach our children about the danger of wild animals. After all, we don’t want them to wander off and fall victim to a predator. And so, we tell them stories about *Peter and the Wolf*, and *Little Red Riding Hood*, and *The Three Little Pigs*. In each of these stories, the wolf is cunning and persistent in search of its next meal. The predator hides, and puts on disguises, and even tries to talk his way into gaining the upper hand. The message for us is obvious: beware of wolves – especially the smooth talkers and those dressed in sheep’s clothing. Not everyone and everything has our best interest at heart.

So what, then, are we to make of this next story? In 2003, in a suburb of Juneau, Alaska, Nick Jans watched with horror as Dakotah, his yellow, female Labrador Retriever rushed out of the house to greet a wild, jet-black wolf. Writes

Jans, “wolves have a tendency to attack strange canines and at least beat them down, if not eat them. It’s a pretty common thing, as any good wolf biologist will tell you, that any wolf’s job in his righteous social behavior is to investigate and assault strange canines. They very seldom accept strangers.”¹

And yet, something astonishing happened. Upon meeting Dakotah, the wild wolf stood tall. His neck ruff raised a little bit. There was no hint of aggression. Instead, all signs indicated that the wolf was flirting. According to Nick Jans, his wife, who did not exactly approve of the relationship given the potential danger, “was looking out the window one frosty morning and there was the wolf curled up out on the lake ice, waiting for Dakotah to come out. With that arms folded, slightly protective tone of voice any mother with a cute teenage daughter would use, she said, ‘There’s that Romeo wolf again.’ The name caught on because it fit. The wolf “was not only doing this with [the Jans’] dog, he was also flirting with others. But he certainly had favorites, just as people do: dog friends, dog acquaintances, and dog BFFs.”²

¹<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/2015/03/150322-romeo-wolf-dog-animals-wildlife-alaska-ngbooktalk/>.

Accessed on November 13, 2016.

² *Ibid.*

Some people suggested that Romeo was a pet who had been released. But, this was not the case. Had he been domesticated for a time, then he would have come to the humans for food, as well. That never happened. Instead, Romeo was “his own gatekeeper and came and went as he pleased. Sometimes he disappeared for weeks. He clearly was catching and eating wild food with great skill.”³

In the Old Testament book of Genesis, we learn about the pain of childbirth, of premature death, and of human labor marked by thorns and thistles. These are jolting stories of human suffering, curse, failure, and sin. And now, in our second lesson this morning, we find Isaiah’s enduring vision of peace.

God, we are told, is creating a new heavens and a new earth. Jerusalem will be a joy. Its people will be a delight. There will be no more weeping. No more distress. No more premature death. People will build the houses in which they live, and plant the vineyards from which they eat. The curse of Genesis will be replaced by God’s everlasting blessing. Even the harsh realities of the animal kingdom will be turned upside down. “The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox... they shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain,” says the Lord.

³ *ibid.*

I imagine that Isaiah's vision is so comforting, much like the story of the Romeo wolf, because we all long for peace. Just ask the citizens of Iraq, and Syria, and Afghanistan. Just ask the families of the Nigerian school girls who were abducted by Boko Haram. Just ask American veterans of war. We long for peace. And while the world has always been violent, it is when our civilization appears to lack the means to secure peace within itself that we seem hopelessly lost.⁴

Isaiah's vision also reminds us of Jesus. As one scholar notes, "the grandeur of what God accomplished in the son put [Isaiah's] vision in a new light. We are able to see into the gospel of Jesus with the aid of this vision, and in return, we see this vision as that final report of God's ultimate purposes for the world."⁵In Jesus Christ, God reclaimed creation. Jesus "recovered all that had been lost before his new creation, starting with Adam and moving right through the line of prophets and holy women and men to his own time."⁶

⁴ Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 6.

⁵ Christopher R. Seitz, *Isaiah, The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Volume VI*, ed. Leander Keck (Abingdon Press, 2001), 551.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 551.

Much is said in the church universal about the divinity of Jesus Christ. We refer to him as the chosen Son of God, the author of our salvation, and our Redeemer King. As we make these distinctions, what often emerges “is a tragic gap between the world in which we stand and the kingdom to which we would witness.”⁷ And what is sometimes neglected is how Jesus’ life and ministry serve as a model of righteousness.

Jesus addressed this gap, not by directing attention to himself, but rather through his teaching, healings, and miracles. In these ways, he “tried to indicate the nature and immediacy of God’s kingdom... which the early Christians felt had been made present (through him) and yet was still to come.” And so, “when the early Christians began to witness to the significance of Jesus for their lives they necessarily resorted to a telling of his life” – a life of righteousness which exemplified the standards of that kingdom.⁸

This morning, I told you the story of Alaska’s Romeo wolf. When he began making friends in suburban Juneau in 2003, he was already a mature adult. He then

⁷ *Ibid.*, x.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 73 - 74.

lived among the people and their dogs for another six years before being felled by a hunter in 2010. He had lived three times the lifespan of a typical wild wolf.

On the occasion of his death, the locals made a plaque for the wild wolf who had become their friend, and Nick Jans wrote a book about the bond between Romeo and that community. This wolf was “not the snarling villain of folklore,” but a fixture among the people and their beloved pets. Locals would say, “I’m going to the lake to see the wolf.” “We were three species,” writes Jans, “working out how to get along harmoniously. And we did.”⁹ Thanks be to God for this enduring vision of peace. May it be so. Amen.

⁹ *ibid.*