

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN

Roanoke, Virginia

December 12, 2021

“Belts in Plain Sight”

Part III of the Sermon Series “Advent in Plain Sight”

Isaiah 11:1-6

Rev. Benjamin S. Brannan

11 A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

2 The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

3 His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;

4 but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

5 Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

6 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.



Many of us, throughout the pandemic, especially during the stay-at-home orders, found a tv show or two... or 3... that we binged. And you may have found a good one and rewatched it once... or twice... or three times even. Valerie's and my favorite show that stormed onto the scene and stole the hearts of everyone who watched it: *Ted Lasso*.

The show is about a coach named Ted Lasso, played by Jason Sudeikis, who is a quirky and mildly successful American football coach who gained fame for a viral video of a locker room celebration dance. He is hired to coach an English soccer team, Richmond FC. Although he knows nothing about what the world calls "football," Ted Lasso nonetheless is an inspiring coach and a student of the human condition. What comes across to some as annoying optimism, is really a deep joy of living and unconditional kindness. I mean, the show's tagline is "Kindness makes a comeback."

A big plus about this show, other than his witty one-liners, is that Ted brings a playful light into the cutthroat business of professional sports, a light that we indeed needed in the darkness of the pandemic world.

One of my favorite scenes happens in the Richmond FC hometown pub. Rupert, the ex-husband of the team's owner, bullies Ted and Rupert's ex-wife Rebecca, who was given ownership of the team in the divorce. A high stakes dart game ensues. Before his final throw, Ted, in usual Ted fashion, offers an educational anecdote. He says to Rupert: "Guys underestimated me my entire life. And for years I never understood why, and it bothered me. Then one day, I was driving my little boy to school, and I saw a Walt Whitman quote painted on the wall there. It said, 'Be curious. Not Judgmental.' I like that... And then it hit me: all those fellas who used to belittle me, not one of them was curious. They thought they had everything figured out, so they judged everything, and they judged everyone. And I realized that their underestimating me had nothing to do with who I was. Because if they were curious, they would have asked questions."

He then throws his final dart to go out on bullseye.

"Be curious. Not judgmental." Judgement comes out of a sense of certainty. It comes when we believe our truth is the only truth, and judgment makes no room for other experiences, other ways of thinking, other ways of being.

Isaiah offers a prophecy of a king that will not judge by what his eyes see or decide by what his ears hear. This king will be a king that creates curiosity, a king that opens us to a new way of thinking and a new understanding of power. The shoot that comes from the stump of Jesse will possess the spirit of the Lord, a spirit of wisdom, counsel, and knowledge. Knowledge is not a cognitive quality here, one that breeds certainty. Rather it is entering and experiencing what is known, a shared consciousness. The branch that comes forth to rule will rely on qualities of covenant commitment, righteousness, and equity. This will, in time, usher in a reversal, when the poor and the meek will be lifted, and the wicked will be laid low. A time when the wolf shall live



with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together. A time when all we know is forever changed. Where the world, and all that is in it is at peace and will be led by a little child.

This is the image of the “peaceable kingdom.” This kingdom-come will turn everything that has ever been known on its head: predator and prey call a truce, and enemies live and play together. It will restore heaven on earth.

If you do a google search for images of the “Peaceable Kingdom” the result will come back with thousands of images. I want to show you three of my favorites I found:

The first is by John August Swanson.

This is a 1994 serigraph. And I learned this has been used for Kairos bulletins in the past. I love this image. Swanson’s art reflects his strong heritage of storytelling, inherited from his Mexican mother and Swedish father. With many influences, especially the colors of Latin American folk art and the tradition of Mexican muralists, his work is elaborate, yet direct and easily understood.¹

There is so much to behold in this image, so, I encourage you to take a deeper look, as you rewatch the sermon this week. Unfortunately, Swanson died a few months ago in September, and I give thanks to God for the work and creativity of his life.

The second is a playground mural painted by Isaac Tin Wei Lin in Philadelphia.

Lin explores the realm where representation and buzzing abstraction meet. Using hard surfaces and calligraphic patterns, Lin seeks to use art in expressing the logic and complexity of written language.² And if you look closely, you can see these cartoon characters wearing hats from rival baseball teams—the Philadelphia Phillies and Pittsburgh Pirates--illustrating another side of peace in the kingdom—come. That would be like VT and UVA kids on the playground, or Duke and UNC fans playing together.

The last one is very different. This one is by humor artist Will Bullas who resides in Carmel Valley, California.³ This is his take on the *Peaceable Kingdom*, but he adds, *with two olives*. It is a great interpretation of Isaiah’s vision. I just love the playfulness here.

¹ This is from the “About the Artist” section on John August Swanson’s website.

<https://www.johnaugustswanson.com/default.cfm/PID%3D1.html>

² This is from the “BIO” section on Isaac Tin Wei Lin’s website. <http://www.isaactinweilin.com/bio>

³ This is from the “Galleries and Bio” section on Will Bullas’ website. <https://www.willbullas.com/galleries-bio>



I saw this one a few years ago when another pastor used this image in a sermon. I came back to it because I think curiosity played a role in this Lion and this Lamb finding themselves at the bar together.

We don't exactly know how these two found themselves in this situation, but I do believe curiosity happened. A curiosity that opened the possibility for these two, natural enemies based on the law of the jungle, to share a drink.

Who do you think was at the bar first? Maybe it was the lamb. The lamb is minding her own business at the bar, and the door opens, the music screeches, and the lion stands in the doorway. As the King of the Jungle, all animals at the bar are scared, shaking, back-pedaling as they clear a lane for the lion to walk. But maybe this one lamb, sitting at the bar, may have caught eyes with the lion.

And the look on the lion's face tells me he is in need, maybe he is going through an identity crisis, or a just experienced a traumatic encounter in the wild. It's a catatonic expression of numbness. All the other animals are scared... I mean, it is a Lion! But Lamb doesn't judge. The lamb is curious.

The Lion takes the seat next to the lamb, and curious and compassionate toward the lion, the lamb leans toward the barkeep... "Put him on my tab." The lion then looks endearingly at the lamb and says, "I'll have what she's having."

A moment of curiosity that leads to connection, an unlikely connection.

Or maybe the lion is at the bar first. The lamb wanders into the Predator bar, noticeably out of place. All eyes turn to the lamb—dinner is served! As the lamb looks around, she wonders where she can sit, or if she should even be in this bar. Perhaps, in this moment of hesitation, the lion at the bar scoots over, and calmly pulls the bar stool out, as an invitation for her to sit. With courage, the lamb accepts the invitation. The lion is curious: "What possessed this lamb to walk in here? I wonder what is going on with her?"

I am not sure what kind of conversation ensued, if one at all, but finding themselves in a bar, feeling out of place, perhaps thinking there is no one who understands, they realize they are not alone.

The courage to move away from judgement and toward curiosity allows us to begin to create moments of the impossible reality Isaiah foretold. A reality that is ushered in, not by power, but by humility and love and openness. A reality that can be experienced in interaction. Judgement shuts the door on seeing the complex experiences of the other as truth. Curiosity invites those experiences into conversation and connection with our own.



When judgement says, “How can they think that! They are being so irrational,” curiosity asks, “I wonder what information they have that I don’t, and I wonder what experiences shape such a world view?”

When judgement says, “He/She, They/them pronouns don’t make any sense,” curiosity asks, “I wonder how these pronouns help this person express their core identity and allows me to understand them better?”

When judgment says, “It’s not privilege, its hard work, and everyone has the same shot at life,” curiosity asks, “I wonder what this person has had to endure?”

When judgement says, “God would not come as a poor baby; a baby cannot be King of kings, Lord of lords” curiosity asks, “I wonder what I can understand better about God and the world, knowing God would come as a baby.”

Curiosity opens us to a deeper understanding on how to love the world and the people in it with the love they need. Curiosity allows us to stop and wonder: What is going on with this lion? What happened to this lamb that makes her think she has nowhere else to go?

The world has been a place where the powerful take advantage of the poor, where the meek are pressed further under the boots of the mighty, where gaps grow, divisive lines are drawn, and war seems like the only response. The world seems far from the truth of the Peaceable Kingdom. But the season of Advent offers us a reminder that change is drawing near. The Messiah comes to usher in God’s great kingdom, as the powerful are pained with the plight of the poor, the mighty stand in solidarity with the meek. A kingdom where a lion and lamb can share a drink at the bar together, where the laws of the jungle are rewritten with the pen strokes of righteousness and equity.

This vision is the hope of Advent, a hope we are called to participate in. And we too are called to wrap around our waist the belt of truth, a truth that reminds us to see one another as complex image-bearers of God, as a member of the body of Christ.

With the courage of curiosity, the peaceable kingdom can be a here and now reality, as we wait for Christ’s birth and Christ’s return. For the kingdom of God is led by a child, a child who comes from the blood line of Jesse, a descendant of David. He is Jesus Christ, Emanuel, God-with-us, the Lion of Judah, the Lamb of God, who wears around his waist the belt of truth and the belt of faithfulness.

Amen.

