

Rearranging the Zoo: Biblical Advice on Surviving the Holidays

© 12.6.98 Catherine M. Wallace
First Presbyterian Church of Wilmette
Isaiah 11:1-10; Matt. 3:1-12

Today's reading from Isaiah has inspired scores of paintings and countless Christmas cards. But for a very long time, I had my doubts about such scenes. Even as a child, I was inclined to distrust all this "the lion and the lamb" business. It seemed fake. It seemed as *false*, as dangerously sentimental, as Norman Rockwell's famous picture of a beaming family gathered for the holiday dinner.

The older I got, the more easily I saw the animals posing more or less as families all too often pose for somebody with a camera: that wolf is growling under his breath. The lamb, who has been dreading this for weeks, has had too much to drink. The lion and the ox have been trading barbs all afternoon over that bale of hay. But there's Isaiah with his camera, saying "smile, everybody!" and so here it is in the Bible. Year after year we can be haunted by all the ways in which our real families fail to live up to all the cheap "holiday season" imitations of Norman Rockwell.

But in fact Isaiah is doing something much more subtle and much more wise and ultimately much more compassionate and helpful than the cheap sentimentality of "holiday spirit." In fact, he can teach us a few things and help all of us to survive the complexities of what is, for most families, a very complicated season. The key to rescuing Isaiah from Hallmark cards is to realize that in premodern art and narrative, in premodern culture generally, the "animal kingdom"--so to speak--was understood as parallel to human society.

That is, the relationships among different kinds of animals were understood to echo or to reflect the relationships among different social groups. I'm not talking about metaphors. These parallels were taken as literally true. The parallels were

taken so literally, they were understood in such vivid detail, that you could talk about human society by doing what Isaiah does here, which is to talk about relationships among animals. In the kingdom of God, lions will become vegetarians because if violence comes to end on the earth, it will mean not only an end to human wars, but also to animals preying upon other animals.

Of course urban life has tremendously diminished our relationship to the animal world: these parallels have lost the liveliness and the power they once had. But at the very least we have to see Isaiah as plainly acknowledging the tensions that holiday sentimentality and media imagery seem to deny. Isaiah is saying something like this: "And in that day, in-laws shall sit at table with in-laws and no sharp word be spoken, neither shall any of them comment upon how the grandchildren are behaving. Parents and grown children, yea, even parents and teenagers shall converse without pointless confrontation; blended families shall blend smoothly and their schedules never conflict. Democrats and Republicans shall work creatively together, yea even on the Judiciary Committee. All divisiveness shall cease, and ancient frauds shall fail, because my love will change them all, saith the Lord."

That reading rescues Isaiah from my ancient complaint about corny Christmas cards. But it's still not much help to me and to plenty of other people who have come over the years to dread the complexities of Christmas. So let's keep going. Behind the premodern social and political symbolism of animals there is something more. Animals were also identified with human personality traits. Some of this lingers in our language today, as when we call someone foxy, or chicken, when we say of someone, "what a turkey!" In our day, it is a very substantial scholarly task to rediscover the power and the specific content of these references to animals in older texts.

But this much is absolutely clear: up through the European Renaissance, perhaps even as late as the seventeenth century, art and narrative involving animals were also symbolic discourse about human psychology, about human personality and motive and so forth. For instance, wolves are bold hunters, but

they are also shrewd and cunning. Sheep are notoriously brainless creatures, but that lets them function as images of the innocent and the trusting.

When sheep are paired with wolves, then, one way or another somebody is trying to say something about the interaction of very sharp judgment and open-hearted trust. The same resonance vibrates around lions and oxen. Lions were emblems not only of regal power but also of our human capacity to use power in violent ways. Oxen were emblems of service because they are remarkably splendid work animals on farms. But because they are docile and hard-working and low-maintenance creatures, they were also emblems of our human capacity to exploit one another or to be exploited. When lions and oxen are paired as Isaiah pairs them, we have a visual argument or a visual image of power and service as cooperative equals, not as predator and victim.

So when we consider Isaiah's portraits of these animals, we should not imagine redemption as a zoo with all the cages open or maybe a dinner table where everyone bites his tongue and says nothing and smiles grimly for the camera. Isaiah is describing a change in our hearts, a profound and liberating change.

There are, Isaiah would say, all of these animals inside all of us. We are the wolves. We are sheep. We can be clueless and we can be cunning. We can be violent and we can let ourselves be exploited. And because we know that we can be all of these negative things, we are endlessly on guard against "predators" in the world around us. We are on the defensive.

But when we are too much on guard against attack, when we are too quick to counter-attack, we are very likely to call out the wolf and the lion in the people around us. What drives the conflicts *among* us, in short, is the conflicts *within* us. Let me say that again: what drives the conflicts among us is the conflicts within us. Isaiah's portrait of the wolf and the lamb is meant to remind us that our claws are sharpest and our teeth are most dangerous when we are feeling . . . most sheepish.

So is there any hope for us? Is there any way in which Isaiah can help us get through the holidays this year? I think so. And the argument goes like this: If

Jesus were to be born among us in our own time, he would be born to the homeless. Joseph was a carpenter, after all, and in ancient times a carpenter was not a solid working-class tradesman but the absolutely lowest most marginal sort of transient day-labor. Jesus' healing ministry would take place for the most part among addicts and drug dealers and sex offenders and organized crime--among the people that decent folks--then and now--hold most in contempt.

The point of Jesus' ministry, then and now, is to get it through our thick heads that we have nothing to prove to God. God loves us because of who God is. Period. God knows we feel sometimes like lost sheep or like fatted calves led to slaughter. God knows we feel sometimes like starving wolves, like lions desperately scouring the savanna. God knows. *God knows*. God knows what it feels like to feel abandoned, to feel like a failure, to see everything we have worked for turn to nothing. That's also part of what Jesus shows us about God.

But in the resurrection we have word that we will survive no matter what. The love of God can feed us, console our fears, and comfort the anxiety and the doubts that trigger conflict among us. Like the wolf, then, we can be shrewd without being predatory; like the lamb, we can be open-hearted without being served up as lunch.

Better yet, we can be as shrewd as the wolf but as innocent as the lamb: we can use our good judgment for good purposes not conniving ones. Like the lion, we can be courageous without being violent, or like the ox we can serve others with dignity and strength and without being exploited by them. If I have nothing to prove to God, maybe, just maybe, I can stop trying to prove to myself to everyone else around that holiday table, or in my neighborhood, or even at church.

But first we have to see both the lion and the ox in ourselves, both the wolf and the sheep in that zoo on our inner landscape. We have to admit that we are most dangerous when we feel most helpless, most exploited, most needy and ignored--and that our help is not in our claws and in our fangs but in the name of

the Lord, who made heaven and earth--the Lord who loves not only the wolf *and* the lamb but also all us.