

ADVENT 2 A
LOFTY EXPECTATIONS

Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12

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When I was a boy, on Christmas Eve, as I was trying to fall asleep, I would look at all the toys in the Eaton's catalogue. I would envision what I would unwrap in the morning. I had grand desires.

I knew they were dreams,...fanciful aspirations.
I hoped I would get at least one of the new and popular toys.
Regardless, it was a time of excited anticipation, even if it was only a dream.

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Is the Isaiah text a vision of an ethereal world created through poetic imagination? Is it just wishful, idealistic thinking?

Is it possible to overcome the law of the jungle?  
Will the wolf live with the lamb?

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We generally label this as symbolic prophecy about the hoped for Messiah. Still,.....is it mostly a dream?

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The text is prophecy, but I think it is also a job description.
Yes, a job description.

And, I have read some church pastor job descriptions/ expectations that were more farfetched than this.

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Isaiah is laying out God's conditions for society / for living.

We can infer this is Messianic, but it could also be a pointed condemnation on King Hezekiah--the king of the likely time of this writing.

Verses 2-5 does project the conditions on a person, yet it is much broader than that. The word "King" is never mentioned.

Verses 6-9 describes the way / the result.

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A shoot will sprout from the stump of Jesse, King David's father.

We could have interpretative fun with this, citing that the Hebrew root for "shoot" is also the root for the word Nazarene, the home of Jesus. But, let's not.

A stump is evidence of a tree that was cut down.

The glorious, idealized realm of David was terminated, but will come back to life.

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This person will be close with God. This person will be faithful to God, and God will fill this person with wisdom, compassion, sound discernment and.... a devotion to righteousness and justice.

There will be equity, and the resisters to God's way will Not be happy. God's message will destroy the "wicked."

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Let's pause for a moment for a little educational tidbit.

Verse 4 references the "rod." Rod is mentioned in Psalm 23 and other places. Rod and staff are about how the stout stick is used.

Way back then, a shepherd carried a strong stick / pole, and it would be curved at one end like a candy cane.

The hook could pull sheep out of trouble.

That is a staff, and a staff is also a walking stick.

The rod is for protection against threats, against predators.

It is the same tool, just used differently. Rod & staff are the same pole.

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Young David boasted to King Saul that he killed a lion by jamming his tool / the rod down the lion's throat.

Take that image back to verse 4.

The Predators / the powerful rulers of the jungle will receive the same fate.

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Verses 6-9 paint a picture of the beautiful, peaceful world God desires for humanity.

The wolf living with a lamb.

The goat at ease with a leopard.

A cow and bear grazing together, while their young intermingle.

In addition, a young child will safely be with them, including near a poisonous snake.

A child / the future will be safe and at peace.

The future will be safe and at peace.

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This is a depiction of the opposite of the law of the jungle.

There will be no powerful, oligarchs, predators abusing and controlling the weak.

No longer will the strong, the violent and brutal get their way.

There will be equality, harmony and peace. This is God's way.

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This imagery is not about the animals mentioned.

This is symbolic. It is a strong condemnation about the law of the jungle that permeates capitalism and our culture.

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Many self proclaimed realists will mockingly declare, "Oh that is merely an idealistic illusion. It can never happen."

The **way of non-violence** and **pacifism** is belittled and discredited with such allegations.

Deniers assert that people just cannot all get along in peace, just as a wolf will not peacefully live with a lamb.

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However, it is more ridiculous and delusional to think that bombing a country into submission will work.

It is absurd to believe that a problem can be violently destroyed, yet that is often the propaganda for going to war.

The Iraq regime and Al-Qaeda were problems, so countries attempted to violently destroy the leaders and the organizations, and many innocents were killed, too.

Yet, from that violence erupted more new, violent leaders and groups such as ISIS. The problem was not solved. It was made worse.

And, the proponents of destroying a problem,/of destroying an enemy think righteousness, social justice and peace are idealistic?

Of course, I have heard the retort, "How else could Hitler be stopped?"

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~~That war cost the lives of 70 million people. Really?

Do we not think we could have come up with a better response / a cheaper reaction?even if it took more time?

I sincerely believe that we humans are capable of rising above animal reflex. We do not need to accept the myth for violent solutions.

Moreover, I think the Allies' violent crushing of that violent abuse splattered all around, enhancing the arrogant notion of redemptive violence. It also caused the post WW2 explosive expansion of the military industrial establishment.

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I think God's way is better. I think God knows better.

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John the Baptist believed in the better way. He was called to prepare the way for Jesus. He had lofty expectations, and he had faith.

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Jesus was proclaimed the Messiah by the NT writers.

They selectively cited OT verses and connected the dots.

And, Jesus' resume sure does match Isaiah's job description.

We do believe Jesus to be Christ, and Christ is understood to be more than the OT version of the Messiah.

Jesus is Christ.

Yet, the results / the peaceful, harmonious conditions Isaiah presented in verses 6-9 did not and have not happened.

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I suppose we are included in this recipe.

I do think we are all to be in God's vision for living.

It will not be forced upon us by a leader, no matter how benevolent that leader is. Do not look to leaders as saviours.

We must do our part,.....yet.

Following God's plan / God's vision for us demands that we must change.
For the wolf to peacefully live with the lamb, the wolf must change. The wolf must squelch predatory instincts and become a vegetarian.
Likewise, the lamb must change. The lamb must trust the wolf, and not run away. The lamb must not tempt the wolf, and the lamb must share the food and dwelling places.

We humans must change, yet determination and self discipline is Not enough.
We got to where we are because of who we are.
We must shed old habits and perceptions.
We must change who we are, and that is why John the Baptist preceded Jesus.

He prepared the way by calling people to repent.
Isaiah 10, the preceding chapter, was all about repentance.

Repentance is changing. The Greek word means to "turn" / to go a different way, in essence to change.

Repentance requires letting go of our old illusions / old habits and ways.
It is turning to face a new vision / a new destination.

But, that is about as much as we can do on our own.
We can accept God's way and see that vision, but to move / to progress we need God's help. And, that takes a degree of faith.

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God's Spirit will inspire, empower and walk with us when we choose, in faith, to be IN God's will / to follow the way of Christ.

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In simple terms: a person will go in the direction they are facing and heading.
We will pursue our vision.

However, God's way / the vision presented to us in Isaiah and by Jesus is a grand one, indeed. It is beyond us, without God's help.

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I think the faithful / those striving to do God's will live in tension.

There is an irony in all this that demands humility.  
In manner of speaking, we are constantly falling short / we are failing, yet in that journey, we are doing better and getting closer.

Our message is greater than our capabilities.  
We cannot practice what we preach. We can merely, yet diligently try to pursue the goal.

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Does this make sense?
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If we choose God's way / if we embrace the vision of peace and justice, then we cannot settle for less.

We cannot deviate. We must press on with God.

Likewise, we must aim for zero net carbon emissions. We have to even if it is impossible, for now. That is the goal / the expectation.

Any other focus / goal will lead us all in a different direction.

In addition, we must have a vision for peace / for pacifism. And, pacifism is a journey. It is a constant choice.

If we declare to ourselves, "pacifism is not reasonable; sometimes war and violence are a necessary evil."

Then, we will be accepting evil and calling it necessary.

Does that make sense?

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Let us all think about where we are heading. Ponder your vision / your hope.

Does it align with God's way as Jesus taught and lived?

If not, well.....you heading in the wrong direction. And, a change will require repentance.

Sorry,.....because repentance can be painful.

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Finally, I do think Isaiah's job description, ....Isaiah's **life** description is for each one of us. It is for anyone of us who does NOT want to live in a world controlled by bullies and predators.

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May God be merciful,.....and may we choose God's way. May we be people of hope and peace.