

[Legos] It was a rainy summer day, and my brother and I were playing legos in our room. I know it was raining, because if it had been sunny my mom would have already sent us outside for the day with some phrase like, “I don’t care what you do, just do it outside!” Rainy days were the worst for us. Not only were there no smartphones or iPads or XBoxes to keep us busy, my house didn’t even have a TV, so the primary options were monopoly or legos, and that morning it was legos.

At least it was legos for a while, until my older brother Chris got bored, as he was prone to do, and decided his little brother would make a better toy than the legos. So, he pinned me down to the floor, putting a knee on each of my arms, and sitting on my chest. He then proceeded to practice lugi slurps.

Now, if you’ve never been a little brother, you may not know what a lugi slurp is. That’s when your big brother lets a wad of saliva dangle from his mouth over your face, seeing just how close to your face he can get it before slurping it back into his mouth. I hear it’s a lot of fun for big brothers. I wouldn’t know. Of course the only way for the big brother to know exactly how far his saliva can stretch is to sometimes go too far.

And this was a too far kind of day, and so I screamed for help and screamed and screamed. But my mom did not come to my rescue, because she’d heard that kind of scream before. Many times before. My brother laughed, covered my mouth, and began the process of hawking up another slimy mess. I fought and squirmed and finally got the corner of my mouth loose and screamed again, and again. I was afraid, and desperate and sobbing.

Eventually I heard my mom yell from the other side of the house, “I’m coming!” And I knew judgment was on its way, and so did my brother. He rolled off of me and began playing legos and acting like he’d been playing the whole time and acting like he didn’t stay up every night devising new ways to torture me the next day. But I knew Mom would restore justice to the world. I knew judgment was now coming down the hall at a brisk pace.

Waiting for judgment. That’s how the Jews felt 2,000 years ago as they were under Roman rule and were waiting for the Messiah. Prophets of old had spoken to them about the judgment the Messiah would bring upon all of God’s enemies and about the peace God’s people would then live in. But that peace seemed like a pipe dream. Rome was a world-wide power against whom they had no hope of rebellion, unless.... Unless God made a miracle, another Samson or David to deliver them.

2016 has felt a bit like this for many of us in this church. We’ve felt pinned down at times. From terrorist attacks to all kinds of shootings to the election season to things at home. We hope that judgment is coming down the hall at a brisk pace. We hope for Christ’s return to set everything right, to deliver judgment to our enemies and bring peace to the world.

This advent, we are in a series entitled Pure Imagination. Advent is the season of the Church year where we anticipate the coming of the Messiah. This is both a looking back to understand

how it felt for Israel to anticipate Christ's first arrival when he made the Kingdom of heaven available now and a looking forward to Christ's second coming when he will fulfill all the promises of the Kingdom.

Part of the way we prepare ourselves to welcome Christ is by listening to the prophets who spoke to God's people over the hundreds of years they anticipated the birth of the Messiah. During Advent this year, we're listening to the Prophet Isaiah as he paints pictures of what the world will look like when the Messiah comes, and we are inquiring into Isaiah's visions of peace to see if they are "pure imagination" or if they can be true and real in our lives today. We want to understand these expectations and hopes, these imagined futures, not as escapism or speculation, but as forces that purify our vision for today. A purified imagination allows us to see, and then to participate in, God's purposes in the world.

[Scripture Slide] Our text for today comes from Isaiah 11, which as we learned last week was written nearly 3,000 years ago to a Jewish nation that was facing extinction because of the growing Assyrian empire. Assyria had already conquered the northern nation of Israel and was now encroaching on the South. The empire was acting like a big brother that easily held down the Jews and practiced lugi slurps on them.

Isaiah and other prophets spoke prophecies about the arrival of the Day of the Lord. This was a day that would bring judgment as well as peace. This "Day of the Lord" is described in two very different ways throughout the Old Testament. When prophets spoke to those who had power and were oppressing the weak, the Day of the Lord was a harsh time of judgment. When the prophets spoke to the weak and oppressed, their vision of the Day of Lord was all about peace and harmony. It's like when my Mom yelled, "I'm Coming!" from the other side of the house: for my brother it meant judgment and most likely a spanking. For me it meant sympathy and peace and most likely a hug.

In our reading this morning in Isaiah 11 verses 1-10, we see the tension of judgment/mercy, but we mostly see the hopeful side of the arrival of the day of the Lord.

Out of the stump of David's family will grow a shoot—
yes, a new Branch bearing fruit from the old root.
And the Spirit of the LORD will 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.
He will delight in obeying the LORD.
He will not judge by appearance
nor make a decision based on hearsay.
He will give justice to the poor
and make fair decisions for the exploited.
The earth will shake at the force of his word,
and one breath from his mouth will destroy the wicked.

He will wear righteousness like a belt
and truth like an undergarment.

That's what I wanted. I wanted my mom to give justice to the poor and make fair decisions for the exploited. I wanted the earth to shake at the force of her word and for the wicked person to be destroyed!

Let's continue:

In that day the wolf and the lamb will live together;
the leopard will lie down with the baby goat.
The calf and the yearling will be safe with the lion,
and a little child will lead them all.
The cow will graze near the bear.
The cub and the calf will lie down together.
The lion will eat hay like a cow.
The baby will play safely near the hole of a cobra.
Yes, a little child will put its hand in a nest of deadly snakes without harm.
Nothing will hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain,
for as the waters fill the sea,
so the earth will be filled with people who know the LORD.
In that day the heir to David's throne will be a banner of salvation to all the world. The
nations will rally to him, and the land where he lives will be a glorious place. -- Isaiah 11:1-
10

[Wolves and Lambs in Peace] This is a beautiful vision of peace that we all long for. Imagine the wolves and lambs in your facebook feed over the last couple months being able to hang out together in peace. Or Israel and its neighbors in the Middle East finding peace in 2017. Or justice showing up in Aleppo and putting an end to the violence in Syria. These visions for peace seem impossible. The reality is that our world is still a very broken, messed up place.

And if we're honest, this isn't even really what we want most of the time. I didn't really want peace with my brother. What I wanted was to be able to hold him down and practice my lugi slurps. The vision of God's judgment we find here, though, seems to have something to do with the powerful laying aside their power and the powerless laying aside their fear. Peace is not one side being right and forcing it on the other side. True peace arrives when we learn how to dwell together.

And this is why it's important for us to practice Advent. For those of us living in relative peace, it's easy to just think about all the good Christ has already done in our lives and to want to celebrate the change he's made in us. Advent, though, reminds us to stop and notice the many ways the world still needs the Messiah and to question where we need to lay aside our power or lay aside our fears.

[Lamb in Wolves Clothing] How to lay aside our powers and fear begins with how we imagine the future, what it is that we hope for. The problem is that sometimes we have false hopes rather than hopes that come from a purified imagination. So let's talk about false hope for a second. As my mom's footsteps were getting ever-closer, my brother was back to his legos and I was rubbing my face against the carpet in order to get his saliva off of me. You know what my hope for judgment was. My hope, though, was not reality. Because I ended up getting a spanking that day. That's right. A spanking for yelling for help. I don't know what my mom's purposes were, but they certainly weren't my purposes. And I found out the hard way that I had a false hope about what she wanted to accomplish.

I had a false hope of wanting to turn the tables. I wanted to pin my brother down and practice my lugi slurps. If not that, then I at least wanted him to get in trouble and feel the pain I was feeling. And if not that... then I at the very least wanted peace, to just be left alone. But none of those were what my mom wanted to accomplish.

[Mom with a Wolf and Lamb?] As a parent myself, now, I know what her aim was. She wanted her wolf and her lamb to lie down together in peace. I can now imagine some reasons for her actions. She likely wanted me to learn that whining about bad stuff in life wasn't ever going to get me anywhere. And she wanted me to figure out ways to work with my brother rather than just start expecting rescue. Or maybe, and this is a big maybe because I remember nothing of the sort, but maybe she found my brother credible when he said I instigated the whole thing. In any case, my hope, what I had imagined justice would look like, is not what justice looked like that day.

[Jesus in a manger] Similarly, what Israel hoped justice would look like against the Romans was not what justice looked like when it showed up in a manger as a helpless, vulnerable baby. I wonder what you are hoping justice and righteousness will look like this Christmas. Hopefully your vision of peace on earth isn't a new 60 inch flat screen TV. But if we're honest, something like a new TV is what many of us are most longing for this Christmas. Or maybe you desire a perfect Christmas dinner with your extended family where politics are somehow avoided the entire time?

Our vision of peace tends to be one of relaxing and not having conflict. As we saw last week, though, the absence of conflict is not the goal, since conflict is necessary for our growth. The absence of conflict is achieved by the wolf eating the lamb or the lamb escaping to a hiding place. Remember the description last week of fighters and flighters? Our imaginations have been trained to work only in these terms. America is a survival-of-the-fittest kind of place. Either eat or be eaten. I wonder if our imaginations this Christmas season can even recognize Christ in a manger, neither overpowering Rome, nor avoiding becoming human.

If we know that on the other side of judgment, wolves and lambs will play together, then how does that invite us to live now? We think wolves and lambs playing together is impossible - how could Hillary supporters and Trump supporters work together for the common good? How could police departments and protesters work *together* to make neighborhoods safe? How could the

US and Pakistan work together to ensure no more children are radicalized? It sounds impossible. But perhaps we need our imaginations purified.

The Jews wanted the Messiah to smash the Romans to smithereens and give them power to rule over the nations. Instead, Christ taught his disciples what the Kingdom of God was really like. He told them parables. The Kingdom of heaven is like ... a prodigal son's return to his father. The kingdom of heaven is like. .. a shepherd who leaves 99 sheep to go in search of one lost one. The kingdom of heaven is like ... a great banquet that all the rich and powerful decided to not attend. And then Christ taught them what the Kingdom of Heaven was like with his life. A baby born in a manger. Obedience to God, obedience even to death on a cross. Christ purified their imaginations, helping them to see the world He saw. To want for the world what God wanted.

How do we have our imaginations purified? We submit them to God's will in our lives rather than our own wills. Not my will be done, but yours. Flannery O'Connor has this great quote where she's explaining one of her short stories, and she defines purity as "acceptance of that which God wills for us." That's not the normal way we think of purity. We want to think of purity as being free from defect or maybe as being true to our nature.

[Bring back wolf and lamb playing together] The wolf's natural desire is to eat the lamb. But that desire and that power must be laid aside in submission to God's purposes. The lamb's natural desire is to flee in fear. But that desire must be laid aside in submission to God's work in the world.

The next time my brother and I played legos, I tried to figure out ways to keep us playing nice. I created new ways of not getting put into a headlock. I probably became a little less annoying to him, and his desire to torture me lessened. My mom had told us a million times to not fight, but until my own imagination was shaped in the right way, there could be no peace. After that day, I began to imagine ways out of fights that weren't just avoidance. They were cooperative, imaginative possibilities of enjoying one another.

What does God see as required for true peace?

Our reading today from Isaiah 11 tells us:

Peace looks like the leopard lying down with the baby goat.

It looks like The calf being safe with the lion,

It looks like a cow grazing near a bear.

That means if you're a cow, you'll need to lay aside your fears and learn to trust.

It looks like a lion eating hay like a cow.

If you're a lion, you'll have to start eating salads.

It looks like a baby playing safely near the hole of a cobra.

It looks like us praying for our enemies and eventually playing with our enemies.

When we begin the Christmas season with a long list of our own desires, we expect the Messiah to fulfill our wish lists. We imagine a peace that is us overpowering our enemies. We

want the Messiah to run the Romans out of town. When we do this, we are in danger of missing the Messiah showing up in the humility of a manger, not avoiding the world but also not overpowering Rome.

So this advent season, we invite you to slow down, to not celebrate just yet. We invite you to linger in the shared hurt of our broken world. This is where we learn to long desperately for the Messiah, to wait on him, to need him. Allow your imagination to be purified by that longing. So that what you imagine as peace begins to align with the justice and peace that God requires of the world.

Because of Christ's teachings, because of Christ's life and death and resurrection we know that God is at work now bringing about the wolf-and-lamb reality. And we long for the day when Christ will return and fulfill the wolf-and-lamb reality.

What does participating in the wolf-and-lamb reality look like for you this Advent season?

Communion SetUp

[Communion Slide]

Before we take communion together, let's do a prayer of examine together: 4 simple questions that help us listen for the Spirit's guidance.

- 1) When in the last week have you been a wolf, attempting to get your way by means of your own power?
- 2) When in the last week have you been a lamb, fearfully hiding?
- 3) When in the next week will you have an opportunity to lay aside power for the safety of another?
- 4) When in the next week will you need to trust God for your own safety?

Prayer: God of peace, you have gathered us today and breathed your Spirit into us that we might be peacemakers. We have seen the vision you gave your prophet Isaiah, this vision of wolves and lambs living in harmony. You know the world around us is anything but that - we live in a world where the powerful too often prey on the vulnerable. Teach us to see the world not as it is, but as you are making it. Teach us today to follow you in the peacemaking you began in a manger and finished on the Cross. As we approach your table today, may these wafers and juice become a spiritual food that purifies our imaginations. May we see as you see. May we live as your people. May we leave this table as wolves and lambs, powerful and vulnerable, living together in your peace.

We offer these prayers and approach your table in the name of your son, Jesus.