

"A Fearless Faith"
First Congregational Church of Wauwatosa
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost/30 June 1996
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[texts: Jer. 20:7-13; Rom. 5:12-15; Matt. 10:26-33]

One of the more popular subjects for early American art is the "Peaceable Kingdom." I'm sure you've seen one of the many variations on it, since it is once again quite popular. It's the rendering of Isaiah's vision of the "lion laying down with the lamb," and so forth. The "Peaceable Kingdom" is really quite idyllic, showing all of life in perfect harmony. There is no fear, no apprehension, just peace.

Isaiah's vision, his prophecy for the end of the world was actually just a restoration of what the world was supposed to be like from the beginning. Genesis pictures a world in complete harmony, properly ordered with humanity as the chief of the created world. Some scholars go so far as to theorize that in the original plan of creation there would be no carnivores, no predators since all would live in absolute peace. Tofu for everybody!

So, what happened to the "Peaceable Kingdom"? Sin. This is what Paul is saying to the church gathered at Rome, "sin came into the world through one man and death through sin." Sin broke the "Peaceable Kingdom" and destroyed the intent of creation. Not sin as some laundry list of petty crimes and misdemeanors, but something far deeper and more pernicious than the little things that are so often touted as sin. The sin that broke the "Peaceable Kingdom" is an attitude, the attitude of selfishness and self-centeredness which denies the need for a God or anyone else. It is the attitude that turns self into an idol.

Sin is a bent away from God toward self. It is, Scripture and spiritual writers tell us, what produces fear. Fear of everything. It's what Franklin Roosevelt talked about at the start of World War II, "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself -- nameless, unreasoning terror which paralyzes needed effort to convert retreat into advance." Fear threw creation out of whack. What was God to do?

First there was the calling of Israel and the establishment of the covenant. Later the Law, the ten commandments, were given. Then God sent the prophets, like Jeremiah who had the word of God in him like a fire in the bones. Yet, all these things didn't take away fear. They only seemed to intensify it. One was always left wondering if something had been left

undone, a prayer unsaid, a sacrifice unoffered that would destroy the covenant relationship. There is a story told of the Rabbi Jochanan who was ill. His students came to visit him, seeing them the Rabbi began to weep. His students were upset and addressed him, "O Lamp of Israel, right-hand pillar, mighty hammer! Why do you weep?" He replied, "If I was being led into the presence of a human king who is here today and tomorrow in the grave, who, if he were wrathful against me, his anger would not be eternal, who, if he imprisoned me, his imprisonment would not be eternal, who, if he condemned me to death, the death would not be for ever, and whom I can appease with words and bribe with money -- even then I would weep. But, now, when I am being led into the presence of the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed is He, who lives and endures for all eternity, who, if He be wrathful against me, His anger is eternal, who, if He imprisoned me, the imprisonment would be for ever, who if He condemned me to death, the death would be for ever, and whom I cannot appease with words or bribe with money -- no, even more, when before me lie two ways, one the way of the Garden of Eden and the other the way of Gehenna, and I know not in which I am led -- shall I not weep?" And even if things were right with God, what about these people around me? How do I face them? The Law only convicted of sin, it did not take away fear.

Then God decided to update the covenant and re-write it; not on tables of stone, but in the flesh of Jesus Christ. Jesus came into the midst of the world to bring assurance of a loving, forgiving God. He came to teach a confident faith that results in a love, as he said, that "would cast out fear." How? By putting relationship with God in a new light. Rabbi Jochanan understood the fear of God, which is the beginning of wisdom, but he didn't fully understand the love of God; this is what Jesus incarnated. What Jesus did was to show us the way to a whole new attitude centered on the Other and others. This doesn't mean that we are to over sentimentalize the love of God or lose our respect of his holiness. I like the way C.S. Lewis deals with the situation in The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, the first in his series of children's stories about Narnia (they're good for adults, too!).

Narnia is a world which mirrors ours, except that there animals can talk. It has been plunged into a time of "forever winter, except with no Christmas" and awaits Aslan, the great lion who will restore things to their proper order. Four children from our world came to Narnia through a large

wardrobe cupboard and have taken refuge in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Beaver.

"Is -- is he a man?" asked Lucy.

"Aslan a man?" said Mr. Beaver sternly. "Certainly not. I tell you he is the king of the wood and the son of the great Emperor-Beyond-the-Sea. Don you know who is the King of Beasts?" Aslan is a lion -- *the* Lion, the great Lion.

"Oooh" said Susan, "I'd thought he was a man. Is he -- quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion."

"That you will dearie, and no mistake, said Mrs. Beaver, "if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or just plain silly."

"Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy.

"Safe?" said Mr. Beaver. "Don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the king I tell you."¹

God isn't safe, he isn't controllable, but he's good and he loves us.

Jesus reveals something of this love when he tells his disciples for the third time in this passage from Matthew not to fear and asks about sparrows. "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?" Luke phrases the same question differently, "Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies?" In other words, the fifth bird was thrown in free -- as though it had no value. As one commentator says, "God cares even for the sparrow which is thrown into the bargain, and which on man's counting has no value at all. Even the forgotten sparrow is dear to God."² Jesus reminds us that if God cares for each sparrow that hops on the ground, how much more will he care for us? This is the message of the new covenant: have faith in the God that cares and don't be afraid. The "Peaceable Kingdom" is possible; fear need not win out.

The reality of the new covenant took hold in the lives of the apostles and out they went into a hostile world, preaching a message of peace. It continued in the lives of those who heard and heeded them and then gave their lives in witness for their faith. Myriads of saints -- great and small, remembered and not -- have allowed their faith to overcome fear and lived lives which reflected the presence of a caring, loving God. They sought to

¹C.S. Lewis The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe: A Story for Children (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1970), p. 75.

²William Barclay Matthew vol. I, The Daily Study Bible (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1958), p. 401.

bring the kingdom of Christ here on earth and to tried to affect those who lived around them.

It was this same faith that inspired those on the Mayflower as they came to Plymouth and those on the Arabella as they came to Massachusetts Bay on their "errand into the wilderness." In the case of our Pilgrim and Puritan forebears, the possibility of the "Peaceable Kingdom" once again became a reality in the "holy commonwealths" of New England. Though, unfortunately, they did not last.

We are forced to confront what so many who have owned the covenant have had to confront, that what we hope for and what is are two different things. The reality is that we live in tension between what has already been revealed and what is yet to come. We see the stark situation of our world. It blares at us through the television, on the radio, in the newspapers and the magazines. Does that mean that we give in to fear and allow the reign of death to continue? I think not. The "Peaceable Kingdom" is still possible through fearless faith.

Whatever the world holds, the good God is with us. He is for us the king of love, shepherd, redeemer, and friend. For us the "Peaceable Kingdom" is not just the subject for folk art and samplers. The "Peaceable Kingdom" begins in the heart of each believer and manifests itself in the lives we lead, turned outward -- not inward. The Word of God should burn within us, as it did in Jeremiah and in Paul, without fear, for God is with us. Where God is -- there is the kingdom. It all begins with a fearless faith.

Victorious love shouts to the four winds.

You who follow Jesus,

Do not fear what leads to death,

Rather fear to yield to fear.

The joy of the Lord is our rampart,

The Lord is my light and my salvation,

Whom should I fear?

Though an army encamps against me,

My heart will not fear.

I shall not die, but live,

Declaring the works of the Lord.³

³Troped Psalms for Sundays' by Cistercian Press in Days of the Lord vol. 4 (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992), p. 106