

BUNGLE IN THE JUNGLE?

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Grace Church in New York
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The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid. They will not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. (Isaiah 11)

Seven years ago the four Waring welcomed two tiny kittens into our household, and they quickly established themselves as members of the family. Still to this day I marvel at the distinct little personalities of these perfectly ordinary housecats. They are intelligent (one, we suspect, more so than the other). They communicate with us and each other using a variety of sounds. They give and receive love. They want to play. They enjoy making mischief together, apparently for the sheer fun and adventure of it. They seldom miss the litter pan, and even when they do, it's close. They are furry and cute and bring joy. One is even learning not to eat his brother's food until his brother is done. You've probably thought the same thing about your own pets, but it seems that the more they hang with the humans the more like the humans they become. They live an elevated life, striving to transcend the role that nature has assigned them.

Then a mouse will skitter by in search of some cheese, as mice are prone to do in a big old rectory. In those days, what happens to the presumed elevated ethics of our cats? Well, let's just say that the cat and the mouse do not lie down together. Jungle instinct overwhelms any feline pretensions to a higher moral good, and it becomes a very, very bad day to be a mouse. The cats eventually want to eat the mouse, but not before a prolonged period of merciless torture. They'll swat it around like a soccer ball, toss it high in the air, and carry it in their mouths to the dark corners of the house, where they can hurt and destroy away from the knowledge of the Lord. We always try to intervene, not only because the cats get sick when they eat a mouse, but also because torture is frowned upon in our household.

I remember one time when I did retrieve a mouse before it was too late. The cats hissed and scratched and drew blood from the hand that feeds them. Where is the love? Where is the fluffy, puffy cuteness? Gone! And as for the poor mouse? It gave me a look that reminded me of a song from the Broadway show *Avenue Q*. I will paraphrase it slightly for the benefit of the children, but if a mouse could sing, this one's song would be: "It stinks to be me."

In today's Old Testament reading, the prophet Isaiah (11:1-10) describes a scene with all the potential for the cruelty that ensues when a cat takes a mouse. Imagine a lamb wandering into a pack of wolves, and a small child reaching into a den of venomous snakes. Picture a goat trying to snuggle up to a leopard, or a cow saying to a bear and a lion, "don't eat me; try some straw instead." What will happen to a calf that lays down for a nap at the feet of a lion, or a little child who tries to engage a bear in play? Who wants to watch the scenes play out to their inevitable conclusion, or worse yet, be in them? Yes, from our vantage point at the top of the food chain, we've grown accustomed to the fact that life feeds upon life. Even still, some part of us recoils from the scenes of nature red in tooth and claw.

Nevertheless, Isaiah's vision paints a different picture – a scene that the 19th century American folk artist Edward Hicks tried to capture on canvass in his great paintings entitled *The Peaceable Kingdom*. In Isaiah's prophecy and on Hicks' canvasses, none of the gut-wrenching scenarios we imagine come to pass, and perfect peace prevails. The wolf dwells with the lamb. The cow and the bear and the lion feed together on straw. A little child leads them all. *They will not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord,*

as the waters cover the sea. To understand what Isaiah means when he speaks of the earth's being full of the knowledge of the Lord, we go all the way back to the first two chapters of Genesis. There we find Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, living in perfect peace with God, with each other, and with the animal kingdom. No creature kills or eats any other. God says, "*And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.*"

Not too many Episcopalians interpret Genesis with the flat literalism of the fundamentalists. I certainly don't. Instead, what we read there is deeper truth, and a more compelling vision: that the mind of God for the created order is perfect peace and harmony. God's intention for all creatures of the earth is that they should mingle together without fear of violence. The peaceable kingdom is the way things ought to be. It is the peace of God that passes all understanding. Some years ago in my previous parish I was having lunch with a member of the Vestry. I met him at his office, and we planned to eat at the corporate cafeteria. It was a Friday in Lent, so they were serving fish – Atlantic cod, to be exact. We brought our trays back to the table and realized that the cod was looking less and less appetizing. My friend stuck a fork in his piece, held the whole thing up and declared, "The piece of cod which passeth all understanding." I served many more years in that church, but not once afterward was I able to look in the direction of this one Vestry member while I gave the final blessing. I was afraid I'd burst out laughing!

If the piece of cod passed all understanding, even more does the peace of God defy comprehension. We yearn for the peaceable kingdom. We have a primal homesickness for it. But it's not the way nature works. Back to Genesis we go to see the catastrophic break between the way life ought to be, and the way life is. In Genesis 3 we encounter what is called the fall from grace, after which living things steal the breath of life from each other through violence. No longer is the earth filled with the knowledge of the Lord. No longer do the mind of God and way of earth intermingle with each other as the waters cover the sea. Now we have a sharp divide. Now living things kill and eat one another to survive. What then do we do with Isaiah's vision? Most of the world writes it off as utopian fantasy, or files it away as wishful thinking. Then we get on with the business of living in a cat-and-mouse world, and even enjoying the adventure and adrenaline of jungle warfare. I've been thinking this week of the British rock band, Jethro Tull, who are still making music, by the way. One of their hit songs from the 1970s is called *Bungle in the Jungle*, the refrain of which is:

Let's bungle in the jungle.
Well, that's all right by me.
I'm a tiger when I want love.
But I'm a snake if we disagree.

Every Advent, John the Baptist has a message for any and all disagreeable snakes who may want to bungle in the jungle. John declared, "*You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance.*" At first, John's fiery rhetoric with images of axes and winnowing forks may strike us as totally at odds with Isaiah's vision of the peaceable kingdom. But the truth is, Isaiah was an inspiration to John. Both anticipated the same thing. Isaiah foretold a recovery of paradise, where we would be perfectly in the presence of God. John looked to the coming of the Holy Spirit, which is to experience the closeness of the living God. What is common to both Isaiah and John is the promise that the earth and all of its creatures shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord.

Both Isaiah and John knew that the peaceable kingdom could only be inaugurated through the coming of the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Savior. Isaiah looked from afar. John declared that the kingdom of heaven was at hand in Jesus. Isaiah and John are the prophets of Advent because they encourage us to look for the coming of God as our hope. It's the coming of God that will restore all creation to God's intended purposes. It's the coming of God that will fulfill our

deepest yearnings for peace. Diplomacy, politics, moral effort, and religion all have their place. They can certainly serve in concert with God's purposes and intermingle with God's intentions. We should never grow careless in these duties, but neither should we mistake them as the source of our salvation. They do not save in the profoundest sense of the term. Only the coming of God will save. And so in Advent we pray, "Come, Lord Jesus." Come, Lord Jesus, not only to a manger in Bethlehem long ago, not only far off in the future at the end of time to judge the living and the dead. But come, Lord Jesus into our hearts and souls and minds today.

How can we prepare for the coming of God, or Jesus, or the Spirit – however you want to phrase it? What can we do? In today's reading from the Gospel of Matthew (3:1-12), John had a very clear response: *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near*. What does it mean to repent? It is more than feeling remorse and speaking words of apology. It involves turning, and acting in a new way. So perhaps we can define repentance as choosing every opportunity we can to rise above the way of the jungle. Try this: let's not bungle in the jungle. Allow me to give you two snapshots of what it might look like choose the peaceable kingdom over the way of sin and death.

Just before Thanksgiving I was driving out to Easton PA to pick up my son for the holiday. I was in the left lane passing a truck, which was taking longer than I wanted it to take because the truck kept speeding up. Behind me was an impatient guy in an SUV who wanted me out of his way. I finally passed the truck and was about to move over into the center lane, but the other driver yanked his SUV there first, passed me on the right, and flew me the bird until he was well ahead of me. So pronounced was his greeting that I really thought I should acknowledge it. I mean, he went to a lot of trouble to communicate with me: rolling down his window, extending his arm into the winter air. An effort like his should be rewarded. Sure enough, not far down the highway, traffic slowed and I had the perfect opportunity to pull up alongside my fellow motorist and salute him. Did I do it? Nope! Much as it would have been all right by me to bungle in the jungle, you will be glad to know that I, the Rector of Grace Church, chose to ride alongside him in peace. I repented of my hot-headed scheme. "*Repent,*" said John, "*for the kingdom of heaven has come near.*"

The second snapshot is a story I heard last October in connection with the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize. Alfred Nobel was a 19th century Swedish chemist whose family was in the business of armaments and explosives. Alfred was quite adept in the field. He designed detonators and blasting caps, and eventually invented dynamite. He opened dozens of factories, and made a fortune selling weapons to nations at war. In 1888 one of Nobel's brothers died, but various newspapers mistakenly published Alfred's obituary, with the headline, "The Merchant of Death is Dead." Nobel was chagrined to read what would be his legacy unless he were to make drastic changes – unless he were to repent. What he did was rewrite his will so that his vast fortune would establish the Nobel Prizes. Perhaps the most recognizable of these is the Nobel Peace Prize, awarded annually to the person who does the most to promote peace on earth and goodwill to all people. Alfred Nobel repented. He changed course. "*Repent,*" said John, "*for the kingdom of heaven has come near.*"

It is not likely that you or I will receive a Nobel Prize for the small gestures we make – or don't make – to promote the peaceable kingdom. Nevertheless, every time we choose not to bungle in the jungle, we open ourselves just a bit more to experiencing the peace of God which passes all understanding. So keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord. And prepare for the day when the earth, and everything that has the breath of life, will be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.