

Come On, Come On, Emmanuel

By
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Isaiah 11:1-10

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall 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. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see or decide by what his ears hear, but with righteousness he shall judge for the poor and decide with equity for the oppressed of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

The wolf shall live with the lamb; the leopard shall lie down with the kid; the calf and the lion will feed together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

When I was in the 8th or 9th grade, I was studying hard for a Biology exam. I shared my frustration with my family over dinner, and my father offered to help me study. So up we went to my bedroom, with textbook and flash cards and class notes spread all around. I was in the thick of memorization--all things kingdom and phylum and genus and species. And my sweet father got right in the thick of it with me, quizzing me, helping me make connections, and by his very presence, bringing my anxiety down bit by bit.

And then a really special thing happened. My dad paused and said, “Isn’t this amazing? Isn’t it amazing that God created all these creatures, in all of their intricacies, that everything fits together in this grand thing we call life?” We marveled at systems like the food chain and God’s work in the world, and then my dad offered to pray--right there in the middle of the flash cards and class notes, we gave thanks for this amazing world and the diversity of life.

My dad showed me something that night. Not only that some things are worth pausing and praying about. He also showed me that it’s worth looking beyond the immediate situation (like stress about an exam) to see the larger picture (God’s handiwork in the world). That each little fish’s fin and the wolves’ teeth and the cow’s udder are all part of a grander thing called life on earth. He gave me a vision beyond the stress I was feeling so I could tap into and appreciate a greater understanding of the world, beyond that one exam. He taught me that it’s worth looking up and looking beyond.

Looking up and looking beyond is what the prophet Isaiah is doing in our reading today. There are two distinct visions in this text: the first is the vision of an ideal ruler--one who is righteous and just and faithful to God.

Isaiah tells of a time when good will prevail, and the poor and oppressed will receive favor.

Which begs the question, *why* is Isaiah prophesying an ideal ruler. Certainly, you don't wax poetic about ideals when times are good. From the best that scholars can tell, Isaiah spoke these words during Assyrian occupation, a time when righteous and just rulers were nowhere to be found. God places this prophecy on Isaiah's heart, to speak to the people's longing for a wise and fair leader in the midst of oppressive and troubled times. So that's the first part of our passage: a vision for a ruler who leads with wisdom, righteousness, fairness, and faith.

The second vision Isaiah shares is the vision for a peaceful kingdom: a time when predator does not hunt prey. Wolves dwell with little lambs, bears hang out with cows, and even lions become vegetarian I guess; they will eat straw like the ox. And this vision expands beyond the animal kingdom to include humankind. A little child will not only be safe to play near the dens of vipers and cobras (can you imagine!), Isaiah says a little child shall *lead* the whole peaceable kingdom. Notably, every creature in this vision loses its role in the food chain of predator and prey, that naturally violent continuum of identity. Isaiah says they will all live peacefully, side by side in harmonious coexistence.

Now these are two very distinct visions, but biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann makes the case that even though they are distinct, they go together. He posits that Isaiah is in fact saying that one vision follows the other: the peaceable kingdom is *only* possible once the right leadership is in place. If you have a ruler who is oppressive and unjust and tyrannical, you can expect the same from the people.

Another favorite biblical scholar of mine, Tyler Mayfield, puts the two scriptures we read today in conversation with each other, because these two always get paired together in Advent. In Matthew, John the Baptist, too, has a vision of a ruler to come: Jesus the Christ, who he says will baptize not with water as he does, but with the Holy Spirit.

Mayfield makes a helpful distinction between the two types of vision that Isaiah and John the Baptist have. It's the difference between *fore-telling* and *forth-telling*. John the Baptist's vision is *fore-telling*, almost like a prediction or insider knowledge: this specific person will come, and here is how he will be.

Isaiah's vision, by contrast, is a *forth-telling*. His prophecy about a wise ruler and a peaceable kingdom is about bringing *forth* truth about present-day realities, and looking beyond them. *Forth-telling* gave the people hope in reminding them that this, too, shall pass: one day a ruler will come who is righteous and just and fair. *Forthtelling* prophecy brings forth truth *and* offers vision: the truth of the oppressive regime at that time, and the hope for rulers who will lead with wisdom, right relationship, and faith in the living God.

One of the questions I'm pondering these days is, What is the function of vision? How does vision function in the life of a person, a group of people, a whole nation? Not so much the purpose of vision (the "why") but the function--the role vision plays and the impact it has as we go about our daily lives.

Before moving here, I spent a good few months envisioning a new life: what it would be like to join you in ministry, what my day-to-day rhythms would be, what I wanted life in the Philadelphia area to be. Now that I'm here, I find that having spent time developing a vision for my life here served as a guide for things like how I set up my home, how I prioritize getting to know the community and connecting with people.

For my home, I had a clear vision: I wanted my space to feel open and calm and peaceful. That vision has guided me in everything from arranging furniture to letting go of things that no longer fit my life. Having a vision to guide us is a simple concept but it can have significant impact. How my home works doesn't directly benefit anyone except for me--unless you consider the ways in which the energy I bring into the world impacts other people, and they in turn impact other people--and now we're talking about the ripple effects of even small visions having impact. I wonder, what vision, small or large, do you have for your life?

Taking the lens beyond ourselves, we can look at this community of faith, Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church. In this season of transition, what vision guides us? Certainly, the 150th anniversary visioning report from a few years ago will help. Perhaps we will want to fine-tune or build on that as we move into a new chapter. Next week, we will welcome The Rev. Dr. John Willingham as our Interim Senior Pastor. The staff will welcome him next Monday as he begins work in the office, and two Sundays from now, we will welcome him to this pulpit.

Our time with John will be an important chapter in the life of this congregation. What kind of energy, leadership, and vision will God, through John, bring--or bring forth, with us? To what extent will we be

open to the ways the Holy Spirit will move in and through him? What foundations do we need to continue laying or strengthening to ensure a rich and dynamic next chapter? And what vision will take hold with the next Senior Pastor for whom John and all of us will help prepare the way? I wonder.

And beyond this church, of course, we can take the visionary lens out even wider to our collective society. What vision is guiding our nation right now? What is your vision or hope for our nation? Does it include gangs of masked men plucking immigrants off the streets or from their homes? A rise in hate speech and violence and political attacks? The gutting of social and economic safety nets, which serve to catch the most vulnerable but in fact benefit all of us?

And what do we do when vision is lacking? Apart from the obvious answers like “When vision is lacking we flounder... we lose our way... we self-medicate... we distract ourselves with any number of vices.” But what do we *actually* do when vision is lacking--pro-actively? When push comes to shove, how do we survive? Where do we find hope? Because, as we remember in Proverbs 28:19, “where there is no vision, the people perish.”

In times when vision is lacking, if we are wise, we turn to God for inspiration and then guidance to do the good that’s ours to do. We turn to scripture. We turn to the prophets, prophets like Isaiah who received their vision from God and articulated hope in the midst of despair. We turn to prophets like John the Baptist who pointed beyond himself to Jesus. And we turn of course to Jesus, who always pointed beyond himself to God. Jesus who *is* God-with-us, Emmanuel, Christ the King, the Prince of Peace.

Jesus the ultimate prophet whose vision for the world is the ultimate vision of all: not only a peaceable kingdom but a peaceable kingdom with wise leaders where justice, love, compassion, and mercy rule the day.

I wonder, what is your vision in these days, for your life... for the life of this congregation... for our collective life as a nation and world?

In a few moments we will sing “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” With rising hate and inhumanity and uncertainty about our institutions, including our own democracy, it seems that Emmanuel cannot come soon enough. In our own lives, there are situations, too, which feel daunting, and some of us are literally just trying to make it through the day. It seems that Emmanuel cannot come soon enough.

Not all of us have the vision of Isaiah, or John the Baptist, or even my sweet father in the study session. But vision does (and should) play a role in our lives and in our collective life together. If life feels too hard right now and your vision feels clouded, that’s okay. Because the good news is that in the church, there are others who can carry the vision for us, who can help us see beyond the here and now to a new and better day. And this season of Advent is perhaps the best time of year to remember that, thanks be to God, something bigger than us is on the way.

Last week, my friend The Rev. Jenny McDevitt, was working with her church on creating a playlist for Advent--isn’t that fun, a Spotify playlist? The plan was to title this Advent playlist “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” But as Jenny, in her tiredness, went to enter the title in the computer, she mistakenly typed what is perhaps the best theological typo ever: instead of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” she typed “Come On, Come On,

Emmanuel.” And then she realized, “If ‘Come on, come on, Emmanuel’ isn’t the prayer of 2025, I don’t know what is.”

Whatever life holds for you now, I offer you this: if “Come On, Come On, Emmanuel” is all you can muster, Christ *will* be born, and Christ *can* be born in all of us again and again. And it will be enough. Amen.