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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
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Isaiah 11:1-10, Matthew 3:1-12

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>6</sup>The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid... <sup>9</sup>They shall 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.(Isaiah 11:6, 9)

Recently, when I brought the Holy Sacrament to one of our frail, homebound members, I read this passage aloud for him, and I could tell that he was encouraged by this reading. Who would not be encouraged by it? To listen to Isaiah's old, old words, and to ponder that *this* is how things are going to work out — that there shall be a peace so profound that men shall lay aside their weapons and beasts shall lay aside their claws and fangs — well, that is a beautiful destiny to have ahead of us.

Everyone, then, could be comforted by Isaiah's vision of the peaceable kingdom to come. Still, I suspect that the frail elderly hear this reading differently from those of you who are still young and strong.

I fear that I cannot yet do justice to the complexity and the richness of the life of the frail elderly. But I do think I have noticed this: For the frail elderly, their declining strength is often matched by an increasing rest in the Lord. There is not too much more fighting they can do. They can wait upon the Lord and they can pray for the kingdom, but their days of vigorous contention and striving are behind them. They have fought their good fight, whatever it is, and now they must leave much of the fighting to others. Their battles nowadays are more homey. They contend against arthritis or a weak heart or a fixed income, but they do not imagine themselves to be builders of the kingdom. And so, when they hear about the wolf dwelling in peace with the lamb, they hear it with a kind of innocence and gratitude to God. They know that if the world is going to work out *that* way, it is going to be God's gift to humanity. They will do what they

can, speak a gentle word as they are able, but for the most part, they do not think that the coming of God's kingdom will be their doing. When the kingdom comes, it will not be so much their doing, frail as they are, but rather a gift they can receive. And they are glad that in the Holy Sacrament they are promised that they too shall receive this gift. They too are going to live in the peaceable kingdom one day.

But what of you here who are still strong, whether you are youth or elderly? Does not this proclamation of the peaceable kingdom lay some moral obligation on you now? If are young and strong and think you will live forever, I do not blame you for thinking you will live forever. You should think that! It is one of the privileges of youth. It is a way of rejoicing in the health and strength God has granted you. But if you are strong and still fit for battle, then *what*, Dearhearts, do you mean to be fighting for? If you believe in the peaceable kingdom to come, should you not be striving to be people of peace even now? If you believe in a world in which the leopard does not slash and slay, should you not, whenever you can, lay aside your claws?

I am not speaking of you soldiers or police or other people called to fight for justice. Your calling before God is to protect the innocent, even if you yourself must engage in battle to do so. But many of us are not soldiers or police or prosecutors. Sometimes we find ourselves with the legitimate option of peace. Does not hope for God's peace call us to choose peace even now?

This, then, is the question I mean to pose in this sermon: For what are you hoping? And

this is my theme: If you are hoping for the ways of Jesus to prevail, then it is time to start walking in those ways even now.

Last Sunday was a snowy Sunday. Who could have blamed folks for staying home, especially if they feared they might slip in the snow. Yet, here at Immanuel, our attendance was up last Sunday. As I recall it, we had one hundred and eleven people in church. I am eager for the day when we have two hundred people here in church, or four hundred. But for now, one hundred and eleven is better than one hundred. And that's what we had. More people than average hastened off to church last Sunday.

Here is my theory why: I think we are in the mood for some hope, and that is the theme of Advent. If we can make it, if we are young enough and able enough, we head off to church for Advent because we are very much in the mood to hear about the wolf dwelling in peace with the lamb, the leopard with the kid, the sword being refashioned into a ploughshare, the spear into a pruning hook, and about the coming of the Messiah. Our eyes are hungering for the blue paraments of Advent and for our banners, even our banner of rough old John the Baptist.

We human beings are built for hope. Nothing energizes us like hope, and nothing exhausts and enfeebles us like despair. This morning's Bible readings are great readings for us, then, because they teach us about hope, both about the content of hope and about the morality of hope. Let's begin with hope's content.

Judging by our Isaiah reading, the content of hope is not victory, but peace. There is an extraordinary large-heartedness in this passage from Isaiah. The prophet lived during an ominous time for Israel and Judah. Under King David, Israel had been a strong nation, but by the time of Isaiah (whose ministry stretched from 740-700 B.C.), the old kingdom had become fractured, fragile, and threatened by surrounding empires. Israel was almost an afterthought amidst the machinations of Assyria, Syria, and Egypt. Especially threatening was the powerful empire of

Assyria. In fact, during the lifetime of Assyria, that empire destroyed Israel and reduced Judah to the status of a vassal state.

Assyria, then, was the grim horizon for Isaiah's ministry. Assyria was the horrible cloud overshadowing Israel. To shift the loftiness of this discussion from the high altitudes of the Bible to the more lowly levels of the Simpsons, there's a passing scene in one of the Simpson episodes where poor Ned Flanders surveys his ruined flower garden, wipes a tear from his eye, and mildly complains to Homer Simpson, "It's bad enough that you took all my flowers. But did you have to salt the earth as well?" To which Homer simply answers, "Yes." Well, that's how Assyria was. Not only did Assyria conquer a land, but she disrupted it terribly, so that the people had little hope of recovery. She did that by displacing the native people and relocating foreign people and foreign ways to the land she had conquered. So, when the people of Israel contemplated Assyria, they contemplated the likelihood that they were soon going to fall, perhaps never to rise again.

And yet, Isaiah, right in the midst of this threatening political landscape, comforts his people with a large-hearted vision of how things are going to end up — a vision which is so beautiful and so generous, that it includes even the Assyrians. Isaiah, you see, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, hopes not just for victory, but for peace so profound that even the enemy enjoys it, that even the wolf and the bear and the lion enjoy that peace.

And this leads me to the matter of the morality of hope. Just as Isaiah proclaims a hope that includes peace and goodness even for the enemy, so we, in our heart of hearts, hope, not simply for victory, but for peace in which even our enemies can flourish. We do not wish that our friend or wife or husband or children with whom we are fighting, for example: we do not wish them to suffer pain, nor humiliation. Rather, we hope for peace with them. And we do not hope that terrorists will die in burning oil, but rather, that they will turn from their wickedness and live.

That phrase, “in our heart of hearts,” has a specific meaning for a Christian. It refers to us at our best. Indeed, it refers to us in our truest selves, which means, in the end, that it refers to Christ. When our hope is most pure, it stumbles upon the enemy and makes him a friend. When our hope is most innocent, it comes upon the possessed man, and leaves him clothed and in his right mind, as Jesus came upon poor Legion and left him whole and at peace (Mark 5:14-15). When our hope is most Christlike, it ponders the soldiers and prays, Father forgive.

Suppose you have a boss or a colleague in your hands. If you do not rescue that one, he will be found out, she will be found out. He will be revealed to be the incompetent you already know him to be... only, in the long run, he will not be quite so incompetent if you remain at his side and help him. And so the question arises: what are you hoping for? What is your picture of your future? What do you want your retirement party twenty years from now to be like? And how do you want to enter the peaceable kingdom? Do you want to be filled with regret before this one? Do you want to dwell together in peace, like the wolf with the lamb, only knowing that in this earthly life, you were not a person of peace, but rather used your fangs and claws to slash and hurt?

“Father, forgive them,” prayed our Lord, even at the extreme edge of his suffering. And therefore, in the kingdom, Jesus is going to be able to look those soldiers in the eye and know that he did them no harm. And imagine how joyful they will be to see him again!

As our hope goes, so goes our life and our prayers. So, let us get our hopes under control. Do not imagine, nor long for the destruction of your enemy, but rather for that day when the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, when the

<sup>9</sup>They shall 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.(Isaiah 11:9)

This is a reasonable hope and a reasonable morality, through the grace and merits of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.