“A Little Child Shall Lead Them”

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 the poor,  
and decide with equity for the meek 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 and the fatling 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.
There is a video making its way around the internet these days—maybe you’ve seen it. It’s a clip from a wildlife documentary filmed in Botswana that aired on National Geographic several years ago.¹ The film crew began following a young leopard when she was a cub. They tracked her for three and a half years on her journey from youth to adulthood, documenting her life and behavior as she learned and grew. They named her Legadema, which means “light from the sky” in the local language, Setswana.

In this particular clip, Legadema the leopard finds herself near a large pack of baboons. In case you know as little about the ecosystems of southern Africa as I did when I first saw this clip, it is important to mention that baboons and leopards are natural enemies. Leopards frequently prey on baboons. Baboon packs, as a result, will attack, bully, and even kill leopards to try to protect themselves.

Back to the video. Legadema the leopard is hunting, making her way through some tall grasses and scrubby trees, and you can hear the baboons in the background. Legadema does not run away, however, but goes after a lone baboon that has strayed from the pack. In a matter of seconds, the hunt is over, and Legadema is dragging her kill toward a tree to protect it from the hyenas that have already begun to gather, drawn by the sounds and smells of the hunt and eager to grab a free meal if they can.

All of a sudden, Legadema stops dragging the baboon’s body and looks down at the ground by its side. The camera follows her gaze, and picks up movement, and zooms in until you see a tiny newborn baby baboon emerge from his mother’s fur and wobble unsteadily. He blinks up at the leopard, then puts his paws out and walks toward Legadema.

Now, you all know how nature works. You can imagine how this is likely to end. It certainly doesn’t look good for the baby baboon. As one of the filmmakers recalled, “We thought we were going to hear a major crunch and the leopard smacking its lips.”²

But what happens is something else entirely. Legadema the leopard pauses, and cocks her head, and watches that tiny creature move toward her… And then she leaves her prey and walks toward that baby, and she lies down beside him in the grass, curled protectively around his tiny body. And then, as the hyenas draw nearer, she picks him up gently by the scruff of the neck, the way a mother cat picks up her kittens, and she carries him up a tree to safety. She turns back and growls fiercely to scare the threatening hyenas away, then stretches out on the branch to watch the baby.

When he starts to fall off the edge of the branch, she reaches out her enormous paw to catch him, then lifts him again in her jaws and deposits him gently in a safer spot. She lies down with the baby between her front legs and licks him, and the baboon nuzzles up to her chest. They cuddle that way for much of the night.

Unfortunately, being a feline and not a primate, the leopard cannot properly feed or care for the baby baboon, and in the end, he doesn’t make it. But what a remarkable transformation

this five-minute video captures—from predator to protector, from terrifying to tender. There’s something about that tiny, vulnerable creature that trumps those jungle instincts and turns a killer into a defender.

Isaiah puts it this way:

\[
\text{The wolf shall live with the lamb,} \\
\text{the leopard shall lie down with the kid,} \\
\text{the calf and the lion and the fatling together,} \\
\text{and a little child shall lead them.} \\
\text{The cow and the bear shall graze,} \\
\text{their young shall lie down together;} \\
\text{and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.} \\
\text{The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,} \\
\text{and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den.}
\]

This beautiful poetry, more than 2500 years old, paints a picture of that future day to come when God’s realm of peace will be established, when natural enemies, predators and prey, will lie down together like Legadema and the baby baboon. It is significant, I think, that “a little child shall lead them,” that young children feature prominently in Isaiah’s vision. There is something about the vulnerability of babies that inspires such tenderness. There seems to be some deep instinct—deeper even than predation, at least at times—to protect and defend these tiniest ones, for they certainly can’t protect or defend themselves.

We know, although we wish we didn’t, that not everyone is attuned to this instinctive care for our little ones. We remember, although we wish we didn’t, the tragedy in Newtown, a year ago next weekend, and all the other ways in which children’s bodies and spirits are wounded. We see, although we wish we didn’t, the menacing fangs of violence, and abuse, and war; the sharp claws of hunger, and poverty, and exploitation. We know, although we wish we didn’t, that children are not as safe in this world as we would have them be.

But we also know, especially in this Advent season, that these circumstances are precisely the ones into which our God chose to be born—born as a tiny, vulnerable infant. We remember the threats that King Herod made against all babies for fear of the power of that one particular child, and we know that Herod’s threats were just the beginning for Jesus.

When Isaiah spoke of the little child who would lead them in that idyllic peaceable kingdom, he did not know of Jesus. He most likely had in mind an idealized ruler in the lineage of the Israelite kings of his time. Isaiah spoke to a particular community at a particular time, and his words had, and have, rich meaning in that context. But Isaiah’s words also resonate down through the ages and speak to many communities in many times. And we Christians, inheritors of the Hebrew Scriptures along with the New Testament, hear in Isaiah’s words a foretelling of the Christ-child, the one for whose birth we wait and prepare.
In Jesus, God entered the world not as a mighty ruler who enforces his will upon his people. In Jesus, God entered the world not in the halls of power among the people who matter by the world’s standards. In Jesus, God entered the world in a humble stable, born to a poor, unwed mother. In Jesus, God entered the world as a tiny, vulnerable child—and that was, paradoxically, the most powerful thing of all. Because there is some deep instinct—deeper than predation, deeper than fight or flight, deeper than competition, deeper than self-interest, deeper than us versus them—there is some deep instinct to protect and defend these littlest ones. There is a way in which the idea that God would arrive as a helpless infant draws out the best in our nature and magnifies our impulse to protect, to defend, to nurture.

And so I wonder, in this season of Advent, in this season of preparing the way—what tiny, vulnerable creatures might be making their way into your life or into our world? And how will you protect and nurture them?

What olive branch of reconciliation, tender as the spring’s very first shoot, might be growing from the stump of a long-dead relationship, and how might you nurture it? What long-ago hurt might you hold within yourself that needs a healing touch? What person might you encounter who finds himself in need of a boost back up onto the safety of a branch? What crazy idea that you would ordinarily dismiss might you give a little more consideration?

The film crew named her Legadema, which means “light from the sky” in the local language, Setswana. As we await the arrival of another light from another sky, the shining of a star that will guide us to the manger where the Light of the World, the Newborn King, will be born, this is the season when we just might find ourselves drawn to do something unusual, something even a little bit crazy, like envisioning a realm of peace amidst a world at war, or forecasting the growth of a fresh, green shoot from a stump long dead, or snuggling up with a mortal enemy to give or receive warmth and protection. After all, if a leopard can nurture a baby baboon, then who knows what might be possible for us?