

As we enter into the Advent season, we should erect a sign that warns:

**BEWARE
YOU HAVE ENTERED A WAR ZONE
PROCEED AT YOUR OWN RISK**

John the Baptist knew that (see today's Gospel lesson Matthew 3:1-12). Just glance at those verses and you see him calling folks names (you brood of vipers) and threatening them with ax and fire.

The part of the Christmas story we like to ignore that makes this crystal clear is that incident after Jesus' birth called The Slaughter of the Innocents when Herod orders all male babies under the age of two to be killed. Earthly powers tolerate no competitors.

We like to surround this season with all kinds of warm fuzzies and that is part of the fun of December, but these days of Advent preparation permit no illusions.

In fact, a far grimmer version of the Christmas story, right out of all that is evil and terrifying, is in the Revelation to John, chapter 12. There the Bible actually uses the word "war" to describe the battle raging across heaven and earth between Good and Evil, between God and Satan. And at the center of the fighting is the birth of the Messiah.

To use milder language, we Christians believe that everything is distorted. That's the point of the fall from Grace in Genesis. The very structures of existence are distorted. Nature is distorted. We are distorted. That's why the strong devour the weak. That's why there are predators chasing prey. That's why there is warfare. To quote the title of a Christmas sermon I have preached on several occasions, "There's a crack in everything" and, in fact, it is much worse than we can ever imagine.

We are blessed to live in a time of material comfort and ease, but in times of war life is neither comfortable nor convenient. Because of our well being it is easy for a while to overlook that.

I can't tell you how often I have had conversations with folks who were having the hardest time dealing with the fact that lousy, even terrible, things were happening to them. "Why me?" they cry.

It's helpful to recognize that there *is* a war going on between good and evil.

Then you can at least recognize and label evil when you encounter it, especially as it assaults you. And more importantly, you will also know what God is up to and what your part is in His divine plans.

Which brings us to this morning's reading from Isaiah 11. A tree stump suddenly comes to life. A new king is coming to rule the people. He will be wise, strong, intelligent and god-fearing. His rule will be so profound that all the rules of this broken, distorted world get suspended. Predators and prey become friends. Dangers evaporate. Warfare ceases. The whole world becomes full of the knowledge of the Lord.

What's interesting here from a Bible study point of view is how Isaiah's original audience would have received this vision. From secular sources, we have found proclamations that said essentially the same thing.

What you have here, in one sense then, is the kind of speech that was made whenever a new king took power. So, if you were a cynical ancient listener, you'd have said to the guy next to you, "What else is new? We've heard all this before. Promises. Promises."

Over time, however, Isaiah's authority gave a different kind of hope to these words. ***He was talking about the Messiah, not some two-bit king!*** And obviously, with Christian ears we hear a promise in Isaiah 11 that is fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth.

Isaiah promises a radical transformation, so radical that predator and prey even get along.

Have you seen the fellow in Bisbee who walks up and down Main Street with a dog? On top of the dog is a cat and on top of the cat is a mouse. (His

name, by the way is Pike! There aren't too many of us out here but as near as I can tell he is not kin!)

Pike's point is that these animals can coexist, even though they are programmed by nature to create an instant food chain: dog to cat to mouse. If they can do it, why don't we give it a try!

Isaiah would have liked the visual aid. Jesus preached that message.

Our Advent take on this is that it does happen even as we wait for the Second Coming whenever and wherever we are full of the knowledge of the Lord.

Instead of imagining a wolf living with a lamb without turning it into lamb chops, imagine such scenarios as these:

An Israeli settler on the West Bank and a displaced Palestinian sitting down at the same table....

or a member of the Taliban in Afghanistan and a Hollywood starlet breaking bread together...

or Rush Limbaugh and Hillary Clinton sharing a meal...

or....You can come up with your own polar opposites where people are sworn enemies, to the point that they couldn't stand to be in the same room with them.

As Isaiah imagines a time when this will happen, he is not thinking in terms of begrudging compromise or clenched jaw tolerance.

He sees PEACE coming from this promised leader, a peace so profound it changes our very natures.

And again, it is Jesus, a shoot from the stump of Jesse, who has the power to bring us to this place.

Romans 15:7 is one of those verses in the Bible that every Christian should know. (read)

That says it all in a short hand sort of way.

You, Sinner. Yes, You (the kind of person John was calling a no good snake).

Know that God in Jesus welcomes you into a new life defined by love and peace and forgiveness.

What a happy way the lesson was printed up on your bulletins this morning. To make the margins straight the word “accordance” had to be hyphenated so that Romans 15:5 (the 6th line down) says “dance with Jesus!”

Dance with Jesus. He wants to dance with you (none of this 6th grade school dance stuff where all the girls are huddled along one wall and all the boys are along another).

When you dance with Jesus we welcome each other in the spirit of Christ.

We are as Christ to one another.

Isaiah (11:10) said this will be a glorious day when the whole world does this.

In the meantime, in Advent time, you can do it right now... for the glory of God.