



WESTMINSTER
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Gather 'Round with Your Gifts

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As we Gather 'Round the Manger, a feeding trough with the baby Jesus captures our attention. Any infant causes us, or at least me, to stop and gaze at their tiny face, watch them sleep. So, imagine the magnetic pull of God appearing in the flesh.

Widening our gaze, we take in Joseph and Mary, then the shepherds, and finally those in the corners who were also drawn to new life.

Today's reading steps us back as well, several centuries before Jesus' birth, to the prophet Isaiah.

Early in Christian history, St Jerome began a tradition of calling the Book of Isaiah the fifth gospel since Christians so often interpret its prophecy in light of Christ's birth. The writers of Matthew and Luke's gospels directly quote or allude to this prophecy when they narrate Jesus' birth.

Begun in the 8th BCE, and written over two hundred years, Isaiah draws a direct line from the power grabs and love of money by the elite as the cause of increasing social and economic injustices.

He blames this unchecked behavior for the crumbling of life inside Jerusalem and their consequent demise when foreign armies attack.¹

¹ Marvin Chaney, "Whose Sour Grapes? The addresses of Isaiah 5:1-7 in the Light of Political Economy," *Semeia*, no. 87 (March 1999), 105.
<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=hlh&AN=6539668&site=ehost-live>.

In sophisticated poetry he accuses them of turning away from God.

After all the violence, Isaiah looks squarely at death and then describes their future, a new leader, living in awe of God, in a peaceable kingdom. Before I read, please pray with me.

God, your incarnate love possesses the power to create us, redeem us, and be the very ground for our living with one another. Turn us from the artificial lights and noise of the season to quiet us as we enter the manger. Speak to us through these ancient words that we might return from our encounter and lead lives in gratitude for your love. Amen.

Isaiah 11:1-3, 6-9

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

² 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.

³ His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.

⁶ 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.

⁷ The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

⁸ The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,

and the weaned child shall put its hand on the
adder's den.

⁹They 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.

Imagine your favorite oak tree with a wide girth and limbs, strong enough to hang a swing. Or a sycamore standing over one hundred feet tall, towering over homes.

We don't need to rely on our imaginations since our neighborhoods showcase these trees, rising through the seasons and decades, planted long before our cul-de-sacs and sidewalks were poured.

Now, imagine a future time when the names of our comfortable communities are no longer listed in real estate ads or as neighborhood associations.

Instead, the names refer to battlefields. War was waged and all that remains are smoldering stumps and the remnants of branches strewn about.

How did this happen and how do we rebuild to ensure we don't repeat these fatal mistakes?

This is where Isaiah's prophecy begins. Isaiah writes as he looks at a wasteland. Israel defeated once again.

He writes of a tree reduced to a stump in the heat of battle, alluding to the bodies of men and boys. The tree also serves as a metaphor of the death of Israel's family tree, cut to the quick. Its gut wrenching to see lost generations.

He sees a stump and the shoot of new life.

His prophecy describes two images as if joined by a hinge. On one side he claims the people of Israel still possess the capacity to raise up a new leader with the spiritual gifts to unite and heal them.

On the others side, he describes the way of life if they follow such a leader into the peaceable kingdom.

On the first side, from the stump, the fragile shoot represents God's resilient seed. The prophet asks the Israelites to remember God's love overflowing in the past, the covenant to renew, the willingness to enter human life, and to believe it will happen again.

A new leader will possess gifts:

- wisdom and understanding with the practical shrewdness to negotiate across political factions,
- counsel and might whose diplomacy will earn respect by settling entrenched disputes, and
- knowledge and fear of the lord confirms this ruler is not out for himself but gives his best out of love for God.

These spiritual gifts ground their new beginning. Unspoken but implied, Israel's rise does not depend upon military might, isolation, or a dictator. Nor may they return to their way of life that denied livable wages or safe housing, that denied justice and withheld mercy.

Can we hear these prophecies without thinking of the birth of Jesus? The man who will confront authorities on behalf of the poor, who gets in the middle of brotherly squabbles, who heals lepers and welcomes and gentiles, who lives and prays always in reverence to God.

Can we hear these prophecies without thinking of the birth of Jesus? The man who lays down his life rather than return violence for violence, because he knows God will raise him up again.

It's what we want, a savior. St Jerome was right in calling Isaiah the fifth gospel in promising Jesus, who comes from Israel's family tree.

On the other side of the hinge, Isaiah describes the new reality: peaceful coexistence between prey and predator, lion and lamb together, cow and bear.

19th century American artist Edward Hicks loved this vision of peace so much that he painted *The Peaceable Kingdom* sixty-two times.

In keeping with his Quaker faith to shun extravagance, he paints with a simplistic, folk-art style. Even within this limit, throughout all the images, he paints the animals with wonderfully expressive faces that almost look human along with unnaturally wide eyes, as if startled by something. That was Hicks intent. Peace is startling. We don't see it often.

In one of his many versions of this image, at the center is a child, with an arm draped over the lion. In another version this child needs only a thin ribbon to manage the animals – not a harsh staff or prod.

Over the course of painting this image over and over, the number of animals increased and the more vulnerable positioned next to the fiercest. The fangs and claws of the predators became more pronounced as well alluding to the stark difficulty in believing this is any way possible.

And yet, he persists in painting, in proclaiming, the prophecy.

God provides the possibility for the peaceable kingdom with a new leader and demands something of everyone: we all put down our self-defenses and our weapons. The cow might normally flee from the bear, but no longer needs to fear for its life. It grazes and produces offspring and milk.

The wolf can kill the lamb but chooses not to so that they both live another day. Each sees the unique gift the other brings into this world.

The startling reality of a peaceable kingdom, led by a child, is only possible when all cooperate with God.² It is God's promise. God delivers in Jesus.

Most of us have felt preyed upon at one time or another. This year pushed us even further with bickering and denying the truth, causing so many to retreat. Withdrawing may stop the harassment but also means we do not connect with other humans we so desperately need.

In this season of Advent, we prepare for the Christ child by softening our hearts and strengthening our backbones. A softened heart to reach out in forgiveness and a backbone to say, let's try another way, with God at our center.

A long, long time ago, on the night Jesus was born, there was a small, field mouse named Michael. He had big ears, a long tail, and tiny eyes. That night, he was sleeping in a small hole, dreaming nice thoughts, when suddenly he was wakened by a strange noise.

When he came out of his hole, he was astounded at the sky, bright as day, though it was the middle of the night. He heard angels singing.

² "An act of faith: Peaceable Kingdom by Edward Hicks," *Christies*, January 10, 2020, <https://www.christies.com/features/Edward-Hicks-The-Peaceable-Kingdom-9632-3.aspx>, John Dillenberger, *The Visual Arts in America* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984), 130-132, and Paul Simpson Duke, "Isaiah 11:1-10," *Feasting on the Word, Year A Vol 1*, Eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010), p. 31.

Wanting to know what was happening, Michael asked his good friend the owl, “What’s all the noise about?”

The owl responded, “There’s a great commotion because a baby has been born in Bethlehem. Every creature is going to see him.”

Michael wondered if he could go such a long distance. But, off he went.

When he arrived at the yard of the inn, he heard the other animals whispering of the baby, Jesus. He too wanted to see the baby.

Suddenly some sheep got in his way. Michael asked the mother sheep, “May I come with you to see the baby?”

She looked him up and down, “do you have a gift?”

“No.” Michael didn’t think to bring one.

It wasn’t obvious to him so he asked, “What will you give the baby?”

Mrs. Sheep said that planned to give the wool on her back to keep Jesus warm as she walked into the stable.

Dejected, Michael wondered what he would do.

As Mrs. Cow lumbered by, Michael asked for a ride on her back so he could see the baby.

“Where is your gift?”

Again, Michael had to say, “I did not bring one.” But curious, he asked, “Where is yours?”

“I will give them my milk.”

The procession continues with Mrs. Chicken passing Michael on her way to see the child and offer her eggs. A big ginger cat arrives. Her gift is to keep little hooligans like Michael away.

Sadly, Michael scampered to the side of the stable, still unable to get in. Then he notices a light coming through the roof. It was a small hole. Slowly Michael climbed up, fighting a wind he not noticed before.

As he got to the hole to gaze in, his little body was just the right size to squeeze through. He saw the baby.

At the same time, the wind stopped blowing into the manger. Mary looked up, smiled, and mouthed “thank you.” Michael’s presence in that hole stopped the chilling draught.

From this spot, Michael watched everything. The sheep’s wool covered Jesus. The cow’s milk and hen’s eggs became

dinner. Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, and the baby Jesus, sleeping peacefully.

In the morning, Michael, like all the animals returned home. He saw his friend the owl. With an air of authority, the owl proceeded to tell him all about Jesus' birth. He presumed as the other animals had that without a gift, Michael was left out.

Michael shook his head. "I saw it all."

Confused, Owl wondered how he entered the stable, "What did you give him?"

"I gave him me...for as long as he needed me.... I gave him me." ³

This charming story from Scotland reminds each one of us is given a gift by God.

In return we give back to God only what we can...our very selves. When we bring our best selves, we please God. When we welcome the other who brings their best, we all flourish.

May it be so, my friends, may it be so.

³Adapted from Wild Goose Publications' *Cloth for the Cradle*, <http://www.rdbe.org.uk/uploads/pdf/THE%20STORY%20OF%20MICHAEL%20MOUSE%20nativity%20play.pdf>.



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