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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
12/4/2016, The Second Sunday of Advent
Isaiah 11:1-10, Matthew 3:1-12

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

My opening text is from our First Lesson, from Isaiah 11. It is a verse to be cherished by a weary people — by a people who are getting pretty worn out by conflict and disunity and injustice in our world...sick and tired of all the fussin' and fightin' on earth. Verse 6, then, goes this way:

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
and the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them. (Isaiah 11:6, RSV)

A fascinating thing about patristic preaching on this text is that the early church preachers believed that this text has *already* come true. It has been fulfilled in the church.

St. Jerome, for example, speaks of the wolf and the lamb:

Paul the wolf, who first persecuted and lacerated the church... lived with a lamb – that is, either with Ananias, by whom he was baptized, or with the apostle Peter, to whom it was said, “Feed my lambs.”¹

This is a nice observation. The Bible does make Saul, the persecutor of the early church, sound like a wolf or a leopard:

¹And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest, ²And desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem. (Acts 9:1-2, KJV)

¹ *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Isaiah 1-39* (InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, Illinois, 2004), page 105.

The man sounds like a dragon: “breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples.” Yet, in a flash Saul the persecutor becomes St. Paul the apostle. And Ananias and St. Peter need no longer fear him.

St. John Chrysostom makes a similar point, except not about the apostles, like Paul and Peter, but rather about more ordinary Christians, like you and me. Chrysostom says this:

The prophet also foretold the kinds of people from whom the church would be established. Not only the meek and the mild and the good would form the church. The wild, the inhuman and men whose ways were like those of wolves and lions and bulls would flock together with them and form one church.²

You have heard me say it before: The church is not a society of saints, but a hospital for sinners. The church has received many a wolf over the centuries and made that wolf into a lamb. The church has received many sinners over the years and helped them become saints. May this ever be so!

I have three points I would like to offer about the wolf and the lamb living together in peace. First, such things have in fact happened throughout church history. Saul the persecutor does indeed become St. Paul the apostle. Second, such peaceful conversions should continue. Indeed, the adventure of life set before you and me is that in these years entrusted to us, we should trade in our leopard-like qualities for more lamb-like ones. We should get to work exchanging our fierceness for the gentleness and courage of Jesus to whom we belong. And third, one way or another, peace is coming. Whether we like it or regret it, peace is on its way, for Jesus is the Prince of Peace. The day shall surely come when he shall require of the universe that it hop to attention, settle down, and learn the ways of peace.

So, those three points. Let's begin with the first: the wolf has *already* become the lamb.

You might hear of such good news someday. A friend might confide in you. She might tell you the story of how her husband became the man he is – a man more like the one our Maker intended. Beforehand, he might have been explosive, angry, sullen, even cruel. The world might not have known of his fierceness. He might have kept it well hidden at work or at play out in the world. But at home, he was a terror. He broke hearts. But now he is a changed man. These days he is more like Jesus Christ, whose name he bears. He came to church one day, and this time, something happened. This time, he became more serious about the life he was living. He became more conscious of the

² Ibid.

damage he was doing to people he loved. He noticed the gap between the kind of man he is and the kind of man Jesus is, and he wanted to become a better man. So, bit by bit he surrendered the mastery of his life over to Jesus. He learned of our Lord and tried his hand at becoming more Christ-like. He availed himself of the means of grace: He made an appointment with the pastor or the priest, made his private confession, received absolution. He began to pray – child-like prayers at first: “God is great, God is good, and we thank him for this food. By his hands we all are fed. Grant us, Lord, our daily bread. Amen.” “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. Amen.” In time, his prayers began to include other matters, including prayer for the poor, for the grieving, for the victims of crime or calamity, for unity in our land, and peace in our hearts. One day, he tried making the sign of the cross: touched his forehead, then his chest, then one shoulder, then the other. He did so in church. That was not too hard because other people do it too. But then he learned to make the sign of the cross at the end of the dinner prayer right there in the restaurant, in broad daylight. He hoped that this public confession of faith might lead some other struggling person to Jesus.

These things *have happened* in the long history of the church. Wolves have become lambs. It does mean that they became quiet or timid or milquetoast, but rather they became truer human beings. Indeed, they might have become more courageous in life – more like Jesus, who never wilted before opponents nor before even Satan himself.

Leopards are fierce animals. I recently saw a nature film about a big lion sneaking up on a sleeping leopard. So long as the leopard slept, the lion was okay. But when the lion pounced on the leopard, the leopard leapt up and smacked the lion. Leopards do not take grief off anyone. But in the church, the leopard can become a kid – a baby goat. The one who takes grief off no one can become a quiet creature, filled with patience and goodwill. The fierce one can become a loving one – no longer a threat, but rather a blessing to everyone in sight. Such things have happened. Plenty of times. Jesus can perform wonders in the life of a person.

Which leads me to my second point: This business of the wolf dwelling in peace with the lamb should continue, even now. Saul, the wolf, did indeed dwell in peace with Ananias the lamb. If we have not yet started to do this, now is the time to begin.

Wonders of conversion lie available to us. You might listen to me talking about sinners becoming saints and think to yourself, “Yes, but I cannot do that. I am too stuck in my ways. I am irredeemable!” Fear no such thing! Do not doubt the grace of God and its ability to change a wolf into a lamb, a saint into a sinner, a blasphemer of Christ into a disciple of Christ.

They say of Mary Magdalene that at one time in her life, she had seven demons. If you have seen one demon at work – say lust or addiction – then

you know that a demon can wreck a life. Imagine being driven by seven of them! But Mary Magdalene became a true disciple of Jesus Christ. She stuck with him at the foot of the cross. When the Twelve had fled or betrayed Jesus, she lingered with him. She was the first to learn of the resurrection of our Lord. She is honored throughout the church as "The apostle to the apostles." It was with her as my dear old Pastor Raymond Shaheen once put it: "Every saint has a past. Every sinner has a future." You have a future. I have a future. Wonders of goodness remain open to us, because Jesus remains open to us. Though we be the most wretched of sinners, Jesus bids us come to him and he will be no means cast us out. Let the grace of conversion that has touched and improved many lives in the past touch and improve many lives even today, even here and now.

My last point about the wolf and the lamb is to lift up the world to come. If peace has already started in the church, with Saul the persecutor becoming St. Paul the saint... if it has commenced in the church, its perfection is still ahead of us. Better times are coming. I do not say this as a toss-off line, but with full seriousness. Jesus is risen from the dead, and shall indeed be eternity's Prince of Peace. You and I might have taken many missteps in life, but we cannot mess this one up: A day is coming when the wolf will dwell in peace with the lamb, the strong will dwell in peace with the weak, the nations will learn the ways of war no more, death shall be booted out of reality, and God himself shall wipe away every tear. The question for our souls is simply this: Will we spend the years left to us getting ready for this reality, or will we bury our heads in the sand, devote ourselves to unworthy projects, lose ourselves in deeds that cannot stand when that good day comes, and render ourselves skinny with so very little to show on that great and final day?

The wolf shall dwell in peace with the lamb, Isaiah says. The wolf shall dwell in peace and find it to be a better way of life, even starting now. It is better because it is the way of Jesus our Lord and Saviour, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.