

"I Have to Live with ***THEM***?!?"

A sermon preached at Heritage Presbyterian Church

Reverend Henry T.C. Sun, Ph.D.

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Isaiah 11:1-10

Romans 15:1-13

Isaiah 11

<sup>1</sup>A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

<sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>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; <sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. <sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. <sup>8</sup>The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. <sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>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.

Romans 15

<sup>1</sup>We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. <sup>2</sup>Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor. <sup>3</sup>For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, “The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.” <sup>4</sup>For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. <sup>5</sup>May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup>so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>7</sup>Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. <sup>8</sup>For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, <sup>9</sup>and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, “Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles, and sing praises to your name”; <sup>10</sup>and again he says, “Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people”; <sup>11</sup>and again, “Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him”; <sup>12</sup>and again Isaiah says, “The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope.” <sup>13</sup>May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

## I. Introduction

When I was growing up - even though I'd never lived in Brooklyn at all, and to be honest, I never have - I always hated the New York Yankees and I always loved the then Brooklyn and the now Los Angeles Dodgers. I have to admit that I don't know where this visceral feeling of

disgust for the Yankees came from. If you take the best players in the history of their team, you could make the argument that they would have the best baseball team possible; Babe Ruth, Mickey Mantle, Joe DiMaggio, Yogi Berra, Lou Gehrig, Tony Lazzarri, Derek Jeter, and Alex Rodriguez might be the best starting lineup that any team in the history of Major League Baseball could field, period end of story. So it couldn't have been the players that so turned me off. Maybe it was their manager, Billy Martin. Maybe it was their owner, George Steinbrenner. But for whatever reason, I have to admit that I've always "hated" quote unquote the Yankees.

Of course, they aren't the only team I have disliked in my adult life. In the 1980s, it was the University of Miami football team led by Head Coach Jimmy Johnson who seemed to me to stand so much against what I thought college athletics should be about. In the 1990s, after Jerry Jones bought the Cowboys, I've always rooted for them to lose. And the Pat Riley NY Knicks, whose basic approach to the game seemed to be "The refs can't call every foul, so we'll foul on every play and hope the refs will swallow their whistles," were such a contrast to the Showtime Lakers and the Larry Bird Celtics, that I couldn't wrap my mind around them as well.

(slide2) Of course, for the most part, those kinds of dislikes are pretty normal. Different people from different areas root for different teams, or support different ethical positions, or have different beliefs about how much influence the Federal government should exert at the state level. I've never lived in a place where that didn't happen. Nowadays, though, those seemingly normal and predictable differences have escalated into something different, something that has the potential to be far more toxic and far more dangerous, and so there has sprung up a kind of "cottage industry" quote unquote of people trying to help other people recognize when they are in a toxic relationship, the implication being that it is usually best to

exit such a relationship for one's own mental health and self-care. An example of that is the image that is found on the front of your bulletin, and a google search will yield hundreds, if not thousands, of similar examples.

And while that is often true, it isn't always the answer to the escalation of conflict that we are seeing today. Just last week, I read reports of a Walmart manager opening fire on his work associates and then shooting himself. In all, six people were killed in that tragedy. After the shooting, a note was found on the shooter's phone that read, in part, "The associates gave me evil twisted grins, mocked me and celebrated my down fall [sic] the last day. That's why they suffer the same fate as me" ([The youngest of 6 victims in a deadly mass shooting at a Virginia Walmart has been identified as authorities learn more about the gunman](#), accessed 27 November 2022). 6 days earlier, a gunman shot and killed five individuals at Club Q, an LGBTQ nightclub in Colorado Springs, CO ([Gunman kills 5 at LGBTQ nightclub in Colorado Springs before patrons confront and stop him, police say | CNN](#), accessed 27 November 2022). And a megachurch in Tennessee was so strongly opposed to mask mandates that its head pastor reportedly said that if you were wearing a mask, you weren't welcome in their worship services, and had people ushered out if they tried to wear a mask anyway.

This increase in animosity is something that we are experiencing as a cultural moment, and both of our passages speak to this in highly encouraging ways.

## IIA. Pivot to Isaiah

(slide3) Consider, for example, our reading from Isaiah 11. Did you notice how that passage ends in verses 6-8? “The *wolf* shall live with the *lamb*, the *leopard* shall lie down with the *kid* (כִּזְאִי - an animal, hence not a young child), the *calf* and the *lion* and the *fatling* together, and a little child shall lead them. <sup>7</sup>The *cow* and the *bear* shall graze, their young shall lie down

together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. <sup>8</sup>The nursing *child* shall play over the hole of the *asp* (אֲסַפִּי, only here and in Ps 58:4 [MT 5] in the OT), and the *weaned child* shall put its hand on the *adder's* (אֲדָמָה, elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible only at Prov 23:32; Isa 59:5; Jer 8:17) den.” Why do you think that Isaiah (note that the change from first person references to the Lord to third person references to the Lord starting in Isa 10:26, which indicates that God's speech ends in 10:25 [so Oswalt NICOT 268; Watts WBC 1:194; Williamson New ICC 2:568; Childs, OT 89]) is choosing these animals as his illustration for the future time? Well, zoology isn't one of my super powers, but the natural conclusion that I would draw has to be the predator-prey relationship between the animals: on the one hand, we have wolves, leopards, lions, and bears highlighted in black. On the other hand, we have lambs, kids, calves, and cows highlighted in red. I'm pretty sure that the former set of animals have preyed on the latter set of animals throughout most of human history (so Ogden and Sterk, UBS Handbook 365 ["It speaks of harmony among the animals, especially between those who are natural enemies: domesticated and wild animals. The scene is a metaphor for harmony between all kinds of people"]; Oswalt NICOT 282 ["The most helpless and innocent will be at peace with those who were formerly the most rapacious and violent"]; Wildberger CC 1:478 ["the peaceful coexistence of animal with animal and animal with human"]; Williamson New ICC 2:657 ["Animals that are naturally violent towards weaker ones will mingle peacefully with those that at present would be seen as their prey"]). Did you also notice the twofold reference to children and snakes of various kinds in verse 8? Does that remind you of any other passage in the Old Testament? It reminds me of the conflict between Adam and the serpent in Genesis 3, where the two are also set in opposition to each other: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel" (Gen 3:15; somewhat surprisingly, only Roberts Hermeneia 180 explicitly mentions this connection). But while in Genesis the serpent (אֲרִיִּס, the more common word for "snake" or "serpent" in Hebrew) and Adam's offspring are bent on attacking each other, here there is no hint of conflict. Instead, verse 8 tells us that "The nursing

child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den." There is no sense of any kind of conflict, no hint of any kind of danger in Isaiah 11.

It is as if Isaiah is using conflicts between predator animals and their prey, between humans and snakes, in order to make vividly clear his proclamation that the conflict and strife, the vengeance and attacking that characterizes the known world has come to an end - even, in verse 8, the conflict that originated at the dawn of time.

(slide4) But this promised peaceful co-existence of the animal and human world is not the only thing that is in view in this chapter. Earlier in the chapter, reference is made to the "shoot [that] shall come out from the stump of Jesse, ~~and~~ a branch shall grow out of his roots" (Isa 11:1). That seems to most commentators to reflect a hope for the revival of the Davidic dynasty (see, e.g., Ogden and Sterk UBS Handbook 359; Oswalt NICOT 278; Wildberger CC 1:469; Blenkinsopp AB 263), which would in turn be presumed to be dead, dying, or impotent (so, e.g., the Jewish Study Bible comment on vv 1-5). What will happen when the Davidic monarchy is revived via this shoot or branch? We learn about that in verses 2-5. First, "the spirit of the LORD (רוח יהוה) shall rest upon him," later clarified as a spirit of wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, and the fear of the LORD. That reference to the spirit of the LORD "resting" (וַיָּנוּחַ) upon him seems to be a look back to the period of the Judges (see, e.g., Judg 3:10 [Othniel]; 11:29 [Jephthah]; 13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14 [Samson]; see also 1 Sam 16:13 in reference to David. Surprisingly, only Williamson [New ICC 2:646] mentions the Hebrew judges in this context), when the spirit of the LORD would come upon someone who would end up delivering the children of Israel from their oppressors. And what is the effect of the spirit of the LORD falling this way on the shoot or branch that resurrects the Davidic monarchy? The perfect kingdom of God will manifest itself on earth. Isaiah describes this both positively and negatively. Negatively, "He" - that is, the shoot - "shall not judge by what his eyes see, or

decide by what his ears hear" (verse 3; note that there are text critical problems in the first part of the verse, וְהָיָה

בְּיָרְאֵת יְהוָה; see, e.g., Wildberger CC 1:460; Watts, WBC 1:206; Blenkinsopp AB 263; Roberts Hermeneia 177), even though

that is what we fallen humans usually do (see 1 Sam 16:7 cited by Alter, Hebrew Bible note on verse 3).

Positively, "with **righteousness** (בְּצִדִּיק) he shall judge the poor, and decide with **equity** (בְּמִישׁוֹר)

for the meek (עַנְיֵי־אָרֶץ; elsewhere only in Ps 76:9 [MT 10]) of the earth.... **Righteousness** (צִדִּיק)

shall be the belt around his waist, and **faithfulness** (הֶאֱמִינָה; the articular form is both interesting and unexpected,

and occurs elsewhere only in Jer 7:28) the belt around his loins" (verses 4-5). We've seen that language of

righteousness and faithfulness before when we looked at the Psalms. Isaiah adds to that the

word "equity" which doesn't mean the increase in our homes' value as we make payments on

our mortgages and as property values increase. Instead, it refers to the quality and the criteria

by which this individual will act. All of his judgments are both **relational**, to protect the weak

and the vulnerable from those who would oppress them, and **objective**, in that there is no

consideration of any benefit or cost to the one making the decision. Instead, the entire question

of his judgment and decision making comes down to this question: What is the right thing to do

in God's eyes, and thus, what would God have me do, regardless of the consequences for me as

the decision maker? Hence, "deciding with equity" is intimately related to "doing what is right

in God's eyes," whether doing what is right in God's eyes benefits me or not. Imagine living in

a world where everyone in authority does the right thing simply because it's the right thing to

do. Imagine a world in which those who have power utterly ignore the transactional approach

to relationships and decision making according to which the right thing to do is what benefits

me and the wrong thing to do is whatever costs me something. Imagine a world in which

people with power act out of righteousness and equity and then everyone else plays "follow the

leader" and does the same thing, always asking themselves, "What would God have me do?" and then doing what God would have them do. I don't know about you, but I can't imagine a better world to live in than that one, and that's the world that Isaiah envisions will be here eventually.

## IIB. Pivot to Romans

But for all of that optimism, the key word is *eventually*. Advent proclaims that this perfect kingdom of God has started to manifest itself in human history, and that the birth, the life, the death and the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is the historical event that has jump-started this process. But we only need to look at the world around us to see that God's perfect kingdom isn't here yet, a world in which Walmart managers shoot and kill five innocent coworkers and then themselves. We live in a world where anti LGBTQ rhetoric leads to the murder of innocent people at an LGBTQ nightclub, and where blaming COVID on the nefarious acts of the Chinese government has led to a dramatic increase of hate crimes against Asians, whether we are Chinese or not. We live in a world when the only possible explanation for lost elections is fraud, and where a former president is suggesting that the Constitution be thrown out because of a lost election. I'm pretty sure that isn't the peaceful reality that Isaiah had in mind.

(slide5) And that is where our reading from Romans comes in. Romans 15 aligns itself with the rest of the New Testament by proclaiming that the church is to be the microcosm of God's perfect kingdom, that the church is to be an example of what God's perfect kingdom is supposed to look like, that the church is supposed to be that beacon of light, that city on the hill that demonstrates to a lost and dying world what could be under the lordship of Jesus in the

kingdom of God. And so it focuses on the human version of the predator-prey relationships of Isaiah 11, namely conflict within the church. And just like the wolf is supposed to live with the lamb, and just like the leopard is supposed to lie down with the goats, so we Christians are called to "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God" (Rom 15:7). What does that mean more specifically? Well, Paul tells us that in the first part of the chapter. "Each of us must please *our neighbor* for the good purpose of building up the neighbor" (Rom 15:2), because our goal is "*not* to please ourselves" (Rom 15:1). Instead, Paul prays, "May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with each other, in accordance with Jesus Christ, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 15:5-6). Everything that Paul writes, here in Romans and in all of his other letters, is designed to exhort the church to live as *one* body in harmony with each other. That doesn't mean that we all fall into lockstep with one another. Paul references the "strong" and the "weak" in Rom 15:1, and if you look back into Romans 14, you will see that the "strong" are the ones who are open-minded with respect to God's traditional revelation about food and calendars, whereas the "weak" are those who believe that if God said it, we have to believe it - even after the the Incarnation of the Son of God. So don't be deceived; Paul is not assuming and Paul is not expecting that everyone in the church will believe exactly the same thing that everyone else does. Paul assumes that is *not* the case. Instead, Paul is telling the church at Rome that all these differences - no matter how important they are to us, no matter how deeply rooted in the Bible we think they are, no matter how much we are emotionally invested in our points of view - all our differences are to be made subordinate to the church's primary job of modeling what God's kingdom is really like. God's

kingdom should not and must not be characterized as Christians constantly fighting with each other, always criticizing each other, constantly demanding their own way because they know best and ridiculing those with different ideas than they have.

(slide6) Modeling what God's kingdom is really like means loving everyone who God loves, welcoming everyone who God welcomes, accepting everyone who God accepts. Advent reminds us that Jesus came to earth because God does not want anyone to perish, but that *all* should come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9). Advent reminds us that "we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of *all* people, especially of those who believe" (1 Tim 4:9). Advent reminds us that "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that *the world might be saved* through him" (John 3:17) because God "desires *everyone* to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4).

### III. Pivot to Today

(slide7) Advent calls us to focus our attention on hope, peace, joy, and love, and this week's focus is on *peace*. For Isaiah, the hope for peace is illustrated by the absence of conflict between predator and prey. For Paul, the hope for peace is illustrated by the kind of relationships we are to have in the church. So the questions for us today are questions like these: Are we actively working for peace in our church? Are we willing to do what we do and say what we say for the benefit of others instead of for ourselves? Are we willing to prioritize others ahead of ourselves as we go about our business as members of the church? To use Isaiah's language, in the church it doesn't matter when you are the lion or the bear, whether you are the lamb or the calf. The goal, the model, the priority is the kind of peaceful coexistence

where everyone feels welcome, no one feels threatened, not one is marginalized, and everyone feels supported whether there is 100% agreement on everything or not.

(slide8) And as a church family of Jesus followers, the questions look like this: How does the world around us perceive us? Do they see us as a community that works together, plays together, worships together, and loves each other by supporting each other? Do they see a community that welcomes everyone? Most importantly, do they believe that the absence of conflict is because we truly and genuinely love one another?

If one thing has become clear in the last thirty to forty years, it is that church membership and attendance has been in steady decline, especially amongst the younger generations. And one of the two issues that are most frequently raised when people are asked to explain why they are no longer associating with the institutional church is the church's perceived hypocrisy. And they are right to be put off by that hypocrisy. God doesn't want any kind of hypocrisy - doing one thing while saying another, condemning something in someone else that we happily accept from ourselves - in the church either. At the end of last week, I read how a private Christian school headmaster was fired from his job because he used a fake social media account and started spewing all kinds of hate speech from that account, which he apparently thought would protect his job. That didn't work out well for him, because the Internet never forgets and someone is bound to figure out whodunnit, but that's not the primary issue that raises for us. I have to ask, what possible Christian reason could there be for creating a fake social media account and using it for such hateful purposes. And I have to wonder, what does the world think when they learn of that kind of hypocrisy.

So let's not be like that during Advent and during 2023. Let's make sure that our lives are marked by love and peace, so that conflict never damages our witness to the world at large. Let's make sure that we are always prioritizing others ahead of ourselves and working together as one family of faith, despite our differences of opinion and our differences of belief. Because if we want to follow God's word, we ***do*** have to live with them - whoever the "them" may be. Hallelujah. And amen.