

"Playing with Serpents" (4Dec16)
Isaiah11:1-10; Matthew3:1-12

In his book about growing up on a Wisconsin farm in the 1930's called *The Land Remembers*, Ben Logan writes about George the mailman occasionally showing off his two-headed rattlesnake. He'd tried to turn it in for double the 50¢ bounty the state was, at the time, paying as reward for killing snakes. But that was for the rattle. Since this wasn't a two-tailed snake, the state would only pay one bounty. George protested, saying, "Don't that beat hell? Ain't that just like a politician? Don't even know which end of a snake bites!" (p66-7)

The surprise and humor of that dead snake maybe eases us into the idea today of playing with serpents. I know straight off this won't appeal to some of you. Snakes may give you the creeps, even talking about them. You may figure the best policy is avoidance, so you'd not be in favor of the prophet Isaiah's suggestion that "The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the viper's den." You may just figure that's careless, bad parenting, rather than a legitimate promise from God.

Actually, I hope you react that this is a weird idea. I'm expecting we have reservations and could still see the reason for a bounty, in trying to get rid of the danger of venomous fangs, keeping our kids safe, and if we happened to kill some not-poisonous snakes in the meantime, ah well.

This perception of serpents goes back to our very beginnings, somehow inherently of confronting a symbol of evil. Whether the feeling comes from Genesis or Genesis picked up on a pre-existing human tendency, that serpent in the Garden of Eden, labeled as "more crafty than any other wild animal" (3:1), is blamed for the corrupting influence of our sin. With that

characterization, the story holds a primal fear, an instinctual anxiety.

So I'm hoping you have the sense that the prophet Isaiah's playfulness must be a bit ridiculous. Maybe, then, you're also getting a sense of an Advent theme here, about this season of expectations, but twisting those expectations in surprising or peculiar ways. Last week, it was the lesson that our coming redeemer was not cast as a triumphant warrior or valiant leader but as a thief in the night. Our expectations are surprised as we find ourselves yearning for a thief to come and find us. This today is another twisty surprise of our Advent expectations. Not as a serpent coming to redeem us (though John 3:14 does play with that image).

In encouraging you to play with serpents, it's a worthwhile distinction that I'm not asking you to try the snake handling that some Christian groups do (you might be relieved to hear me say). Still, today I have to take their practice somewhat more seriously than usual, since they cling to a promise from God. They pick up a chunk added onto the end of the Gospel of Mark 500 years after Jesus, which also suggests they should be able to drink poison if they really believe. In either regard, these don't seem very wise to try. It also seems like the main point is showing off. I'm not interested in you being show-offs, whether it's related to snakes or much of anything else.

But if we're not putting our infants into a snake pit to try showcasing how good we are at believing, then what do we do with this vision of Isaiah? As beautiful as this Peaceable Kingdom (or Godly Zootopia as Jed said) is, we have to admit it's un-natural. We know the reputation of big, bad wolves as anti-rancher, snatching livestock, so it's hard to imagine a wolf living with a lamb. We don't picture lions as evil, but still can't really see one eating straw. If

the adders and asps are defanged and de-venomed then that's simply no longer the creation we know. It would have to be a new creation.

That's exactly what's promised here. God envisions existence where there is no hurt and no harm, no destroying, not only where we get along peaceably with each other, but that is the shape of all creation. It's good that God casts this vision for us, since it's so unimaginable to us. God must have the vision to lead us there, because we simply can't see how it would work. In fact, the infant playing with serpents seems so far-fetched that we who call ourselves realists would write it off as a utopia, as no place that could really exist. Our challenge amid this season of Advent, then, again with the surprising twist of our expectations, is to see how this reality of God is already coming among us and breaking into our reality.

To start, maybe we'd recognize our relationship with snakes and deadly serpents *has* changed since Isaiah's time, and even since Ben Logan's. Rather than avoiding them at all costs or being rewarded for killing on sight, we've come to better appreciate garter snakes of the garden and timber rattlesnakes at Devils Lake and diamondbacks and boa constrictors and enormous anacondas, and other reptiles and serpents, for their place in a natural ecosystem and even as beneficial to us by keeping rodent populations in check. We're able to make distinctions that they're not epitomes of evil. We have opportunities to give a closer look through glass at Vilas Zoo. Kids may even have gotten to hold a snake at a nature center? Any pet snakes?

But really to be living our way into Isaiah's vision, besides the real snakes encountered in safe environments, it is helpful to think of metaphorical serpents. Let's stick with the thought of where our kids play. There is such a

prevalent sense that this is a dangerous world, an unfriendly world. We're in an age of seeing risk at every turn, of stranger danger and terrorist threat and accidents and germs. We respond with antibacterial sanitizers, padded protection, and warning labels, pretending we can keep kids in a bubble, so they won't be exposed to these sorts of serpents.

We don't need to hear Isaiah to be sending kids to play amid traffic, but may hear that pretending we can armor our children and ourselves against every possible attack of this world is going to make us imagine that the serpents are lurking in every dark corner and any moment we may be bitten and take a deadly turn. That worldview already poisons us in turning us directly away from God's vision of the Peaceable Kingdom. Enemizing everything contaminates us with worry, rather than cultivating playfulness, which is the antidote to fear. Nothing overcomes being scared like play.

And so not just kids but all of us can practice playing with serpents, cavorting and making merry right over their fearsome dens. The picture on the back of your bulletin is one Erin Zimmerman took on the Holy Land trip. It's a Banksy design of a sort that pop up in protest, echoed by many other graffiti. Along the Apartheid Wall that snakes in amid Palestinian territories and constricts around villages like Bethlehem and tries to poison and strangle life, this sort of artwork on the Wall is playing with serpents, poking fun, insinuating humor, celebrating life.

With that model, we're invited into the protest. When the world's vision contradicts God's, when the serpents are strangling life or threatening us with their fangs, we can respond with creativity, celebrating life, with play. We practice how to make sport and how to laugh at danger.

That's a valuable Christian practice. Even though an Easter hymn might seem out of place in Advent, here's a fitting stanza to play with, because it says it so well: "Now hell, its prince, the devil, of all their pow'r are shorn; now I am safe from evil, and sin I laugh to scorn. Grim death with all its might cannot my soul affright" (LBW 129). The dangers and troubles aren't gone, but because of Jesus we treat them like they've already lost their power.

One final bit of this: if we're getting ready to laugh in the face of death and all its forces, we should recognize that we're not always just the children playing over the snakes' den, but may ourselves be the serpents. As that brash voice of John the Baptist calls out the "brood of vipers" squirming out of trouble, that isn't just an accusation against others but should stick close to home, in confronting the corrupting influence of our own sin.

Still, this call to repentance isn't about hanging our heads to act miserable. Think of the whole of Jerusalem and all the people going out to the wilderness to John. This is a party. Also together here, we turn to celebrate new life, the new creation. We play off of each other. With that, it's finding that your addictions and cravings, your secrets and your sufferings, your worries and your seriousness don't have the constrictive control over you they claim. You're not stuck in sin. John the Baptist knew they have so little grip on you that you're cleansed of them as simply as taking a shower washes off dirt, because you belong to God, a God of delight and joy, of freedom for life, of the possibilities of a new creation. So take that serpentine desperation and that instinctual anxiety, and laugh, play, delight it into God's Peaceable Kingdom.

The God of hope fills you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of

the Holy Spirit, as promised in your baptism: the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.

In peace, in peace we pray to you
For all those who govern that justice might guide them
For strength to resist the violence of vipers
For your Spirit to fill us with joy at your coming
Keep watch on our loved ones and keep us from danger

Gathered for the coming of your peaceable kingdom into our midst, we pray for reconciliation in all the places of hardness in our relationships and of the scale of national conflict and among the animals of your creation. Send your Spirit to inspire us for joy and play.

Attend to all who wait expectantly for your goodness through their times of need (*especially Lynne Schultz, Rita Olson's mother Ruth, and for Barb Bickford as she grieves her mother's death*).

As we await the fulfillment of your promises, we entrust to you all for whom we pray, with confidence in Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord **Amen**.

