

“Just Imagine”
(Isaiah 11:1-10)

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Every year during Advent, John the Baptist comes waving his arms and calling the Pharisees and Sadducees, “vipers”, and he does it in an alarming fashion that draws attention away from all the great stuff in the other readings. So, this year I want to draw our attention to one of the other readings, to the vision from Isaiah.

As we heard from the candle lighters, this morning’s candle is a candle for love. And the vision of Isaiah, that describes the strange pairing of animals, points to something that is a necessary for our understanding of love and for our journey to meet the Christ child. And that is “creative imagination”. Love requires that we be able to imagine a reality that lies beyond what we now think is possible.

Dog Sitter’s Dilemma

A few months ago, Sheryl and I went to Boston for the weekend to attend the Boston Salsa Festival. And so we decided to arrange a dog sitter for Blaze. We are kind of fussy about who watches her, but we found a sitter on Rover.com who had a lot of good recommendations and lived conveniently on our route. Our only concern was that she had a cat. So we arranged to drop in ahead of time, to see how Blaze would react to the cat.

Blaze is a generally well-behaved dog. But she also has a healthy predator's instinct. She loves to chase squirrels and, although she often comes within an inch or two, she never quite gets one. So we can't tell whether she is really trying to catch them or just enjoys chasing them. We are pretty sure that she has no sense of cruelty. She just loves to stalk things and she often entertains herself by ripping the bark off of branches and chewing on them, as though she were skinning an animal and feasting on it's bones. So we were curious to see how she would react to the possibility of spending time in the same apartment with a cat.

When Blaze saw the cat, which was a rather big one, she did a double take. It was her first experience seeing one up close. The cat did not seem to be the least bit worried. It came down from it's perch on a high cat stand and plopped down on the floor near Blaze, looking almost like a very hairy dog without a nose. Blaze seemed a bit confused. She sniffed at it a few times cautiously and then shied away from it. The dog sitter felt that they would get along fine.

So we left Blaze there that weekend and because the dogsitter also had to work on Saturday morning, Blaze even spent several hours alone with just the cat and another dog in the small apartment. And

everything went just fine. And we were happy, because as long as nothing bad happens, we like having the opportunity to socialize Blaze in ways that will challenge her to open up. Blaze is part cattle dog and cattle dogs have a tendency to keep their circle of friends small, and to be stand-offish, unless you keep socializing them.

I guess that this experience helped me to recognize something that I had not really thought much about before; that cats and dogs can actually get along pretty well. Growing up, I had always been under the impression that dogs and cats were enemies and that if you left them alone together, the cat might injure the dog seriously with its claws and the dog might injure or even kill the cat with its fangs.

There does seem to be a kind of natural order of things. Predators have fangs and claws and hooked beaks and so on, in order to kill and rip apart and eat other animals. So, if you have fangs or claws or a hooked beak, and a digestive system designed to digest meat, it is pretty clear that you are a predator in the natural order.

And likewise, if you have hooves and grinding molars and a long neck that reaches down to the ground or up into branches, then your body is designed for grazing. It all seems pretty fixed. And so it is a bit surprising to me when animals appear to behave in ways that don't fit the roles they appear to be designed for.

I suppose that this is one of the reasons why videos of cats sleeping curled up with dogs or lions roughhousing with their trainers, or animals of one species rescuing animals of another species are so fascinating to us.

They are fascinating, because they defy our expectations. And they make us wonder whether, what we took to be a fixed reality, where things like animal behavior fit neatly into separate boxes, is really as fixed as we imagine. And if these things are not so fixed, then reality must be much less straightforward and much more mysterious than we thought. And if this is true, then a lot of things are also possible that did not seem possible before.

Another thing that is intriguing about videos of animals of one species rescuing animals of another species is that they make us wonder what is really going on in the heads or “hearts?” of these animals. What motivates a bear to rescue a drowning bird, or a leopard, after catching and killing a mother baboon, to pick up the orphaned baby baboon and care for it as though it were her own baby.

Maybe these videos are just isolated examples of animals who have blown a fuse and their parental instincts are confused. Or might it be

that animals are capable of experiencing something like the power that operates within us, when we speak of love or compassion or even God's love? And if so, wouldn't it be a wonderful thing if, as these videos seem to suggest, animals could experience this in a way that connects them with other animals, even across the boundary lines between species?

As I watched an orangutan take a baby bird out of the water, and begin massaging it back to life, it seemed to me that, at least in that case, the behavior was more than just misplaced instinctual behavior. The orangutan seemed to be absorbed in genuinely caring behavior.

And when Blaze wags her tail when we walk in the door at home, it seems to me that there is something more than just hard-wired instinct at work. It is the expression of a heart that is filled with gladness at being reunited with loved ones.

Imagination and A Fixed Reality

I am bringing all of this up because I think that this is the very kind of train of thought that the Old Testament reading for today seeks to encourage. It is getting us to consider the difference between our fixed understandings of reality and what might actually be possible.

We may think that the whole natural world is locked into relationships that can only be defined as the relationship between predators and prey, where one devours the other. But the reading prompts us to question whether that is the only way we can see it.

But I think that this vision also has an additional goal. And that is to get us to extend our imaginations into the realm of human relationships and ask ourselves the same question. In other words, “Do we have to assume that we too are bound to a deadly natural order in which nations and individuals can only relate to each other as predators and prey.

I do think that, for the most part, we tend to assume that the people around us are somewhat fixed and predictable in the ways they behave. When I went to my high school reunion, in my 40’s I thought, “Wow, nobody has really changed. So and so is still insensitive and so and so is still way too smart and I can’t help feeling that they all still see me as the hapless guy that I was hoping to prove I no longer am. We all seemed to be stuck in the same all too familiar pecking order.

And similarly within families, you often hear a person complain that Dad or Mom will never change. Or there can be a pecking order

between brothers and sisters that always feels suffocating to a younger sibling is somehow cast in iron.

Or in the corporate world, we see how fortunes amass for the few, while the worker base struggles to make ends meet. It is easy to become cynical and believe that some are the predators and others are the prey, and that each is simply responding to his or her design and instincts, as though there can be no other way.

As students of human nature, we look around us and we see a lot that suggests that the social order is fixed and that we just need to accept it.

One contentious example of this is the belief in some quarters that if a person is a white male, that he necessarily enjoys tremendous advantages and will be bent on doing everything he can to protect them; that he in essence he represents a wolf that will certainly prey on others. Or conversely it is sometimes assumed that if a person is a person of color, then that person must feel constantly at a disadvantage and be secretly bent on reversing the situation; taking the role of wolf and turning white folks into prey.

I think that views like these are based on fixed ideas about human nature; that at some deep level, self-interest or the interest of the

“tribe” must somehow rules in the lives of all individuals. These views seem to be based on the idea that humans cannot live together in any way other than in a fixed pecking order, where one is the predator and the other becomes the prey. And the idea that God’s love could have the power to organize things differently and more beautifully, is thought to be overly imaginative.

I think many people go through life holding to these assumptions in much the way I went through life assuming that dogs and cats can only be enemies and can never be left alone in a room together.

But on closer scrutiny these assumptions begin to break down. I’ve seen white males carrying out all kinds of loving behavior that contradicts the big bad wolf stereotype. And the same is true of minorities, immigrants or any other segment of the population. The better you know them, the harder it is to put them in a box and describe them in simple terms as “predator” or “prey”.

It is true, I think, that people very often act in ways that are tribalistic and predatory. We do have instincts. We were all born with the “teeth and claws” to defend ourselves. But Isaiah’s vision encourages us to consider that teeth and claws are not what ultimately defines us or our behavior. Because, as the reading also suggests, God has the power to

instill in us a higher nature in which we are able to enjoy a shared peace. God's love has the power to turn us from predator and prey into contented siblings.

In this sense, Christianity is not a religion based on following the natural order or following our instincts. On the contrary, it is a religion that constantly calls us to refuse to follow our natural inclinations, when those inclinations would prevent us from fulfilling the covenant we have with God and with each other to live for each other's well-being. It is a religion that calls us to self-sacrifice our desire to follow our natural inclinations, in order that we might be clothed with a higher nature, defined by love.

So, I think that part of the message for us on this second Sunday of Advent is that between us and the peace we seek, there lies a task. The task is to be able to imagine a future world of peaceful relationships and to love our way toward it; a world in which groups we could not imagine leaving alone in a room together, could actually be left in a room together and get along just fine.