

## A REASONABLE AND HOLY HOPE

**Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12**  
**The Second Sunday of Advent**  
**December 8, 2012**  
**All Saints', Atlanta, Georgia**

I recently went to see *12 Years a Slave*, in support of a school assignment given to Joanna. It reminded me of watching many an Oliver Stone film after which I am inclined to think something like “I know that war is hell, but I think I knew that before I saw the movie.” I know that slavery was brutal and wrong, but I’m not sure that this film advanced my understanding and I came away able to say things like “superb acting”, “terrible story of someone kidnapped from freedom”, “they captured many of the attitudes about slavery among those involved and it wasn’t monochrome or simplistic”, “there is certainly some redemption in it.” But in the end what I felt was that I had watched two hours of the struggle to be human in a system that is all about dehumanizing those involved.” Grueling.

At the same time I have been slightly immersed in various kinds of war literature, preparing for a novel theology session on *The Yellow Birds*, by Kevin Powers, a veteran of the war in Iraq and also reading one of the most compelling novels I’ve read in a while called *The Daughters of Mars* by Thomas Keneally. It is the story of two sisters

and then a group of nurses in the First World War. These are also and inescapably stories of brutality and what it means to be human in the midst of such bloody conflict.

Into this mix drops Isaiah. The prophet Isaiah of Jerusalem promised a peaceable kingdom, governed in accordance with God's desires for all of creation by a ruler who would be wrapped in righteousness and fidelity. All of creation would be transformed and re-oriented –turned—to right relationship with the source of all life. Even the natural and inexplicable violence between varieties of animals would come to an end. Children would need no longer fear the poisonous snakes that they saw around them and the lion will lie down with the lamb.

Do we really have a reasonable and holy hope for a world marked by the peace with justice that is the sign of God being present in all of creation? Certainly that is our claim and it is the claim over and against all those self proclaimed realists in the tradition of Friedrich Nietzsche and others who say that violence is the unavoidable reality of all life. We say, over and over, that violence and degradation and death are not the final word in life. We stand in opposition to those mythologies with violence at their core (--call it the will to power if you like--) that have the effect of dehumanizing us, making us less than we are and perpetuating injustice in a world yearning for peace.

Yet we can we make our claims and proclaim Good News with a straight face?

John the Baptist says the peaceable kingdom is coming and Jesus tells us that it is already in our midst. Can we really claim a reasonable and holy hope in the face of those who, like the New Atheists say that we cannot and that we are living in a fantasy world that actually serves to perpetuate the very violence we abhor?

Rabbi Freidman wrote a wonderful parable called *The Friendly Forest*<sup>1</sup> in which the denizens of a happy forest decide to welcome the application of a tiger to join them. “The lamb, however, had some apprehensions, which being a lamb, she sheepishly expressed to her friends.” They told her not to worry and made it a condition of living in the forest that you also let others enjoy their life in the forest. All well and good, but the tiger began to make threatening and growling noises when he was around the lamb. Her friends told her not to worry. “That’s just the way tigers behave.” In time the tiger’s threatening behavior began to consume the lamb’s imagination even when she was not around the tiger. Her friends told her “she was just being too sensitive.” Eventually she decided that living like this was not worth it and went to her friends to say “goodbye.” They told her not to be silly and, even while some of them secretly wondered what the

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<sup>1</sup> Edwin H. Friedman, *Friedman’s Fables* (Guilford, 1990) p.25-28

lamb was doing to encourage the tiger's aggressiveness, they decided that they could resolve this if everyone would just communicate. The lamb wasn't sure about this. First, if it was just the tiger's nature to be aggressive and threatening, why did they think the tiger's nature would change as a result of 'communication'. And second, the lamb knew that most such efforts at communication resulted in compromise, but how was the invasive one agreeing to be a little less invasive and the invaded one agreeing to be a little more tolerant of invasion a just or proper solution? Her friends told her that she just needed to communicate more and that perhaps she should be less sheepish with the tiger and speak up more. The parable concludes thus: "one of the less subtle animals in the forest, more uncouth in expression and unconcerned about just who remained, was overheard to remark: "I never heard of anything so ridiculous. If you want a lamb and a tiger to live in the same forest, you don't try to make them communicate. You cage the (bloody) blasted tiger."

He gets at the truth that it is all very well for some people to be Mennonites or pacifists; to believe in unilateral disarmament or that love can transform even the Hannibal Lecters of this world; who believe in isolationism or extreme libertarianism and on and on. It is all very well and I'm blessed with friends who hold every one of these positions, but none of these ideas and commitments actually ends the reality that some

people and so some nations are invasive and need to be limited in their capacity to create mayhem and violence and war in the name of economic justice, religious freedom or any other perversion of the truth. Here I'm with the realists. I want the tigers of the world caged if they are to be in relation with those they would victimize. I don't believe there will be prisons in heaven, but am in favor of forcibly regulating the lives of those who are not only unable to regulate their own behavior and are damaging or murderous toward others. In general I prefer that invasive agents be stopped. Is there a proper ethical response to the Chinese claims to airspace over islands also claimed by Japan? Something bad is going on and those with real power and strength need to be willing and able to use it if another stupid, senseless war is to be avoided. We might think about Syria in this regard as well.

At the same time, John the Baptist and then Jesus proclaim that even now Isaiah's vision of the peaceable kingdom has begun in our midst. And this proclamation serves as both challenge and corrective

—even to our own nation when we believe we are acting morally in relation to others,

--even to those who would cause our prisons to overflow with people whose behavior does not need that kind of constraint and for whom there are often alternative ways to be punitive or corrective if we have the will to find them,

--and even to each of us as we justify an inherent tendency to believe the mythology of redemptive violence.

For me I realize that when I bang my hand on the table or let lose a flow of self righteous invective (what we call "Daddy's special driving words") that I am angry to the point of violence and need to step back and calm down and make sure I am responding to a situation rather than merely reacting. And even in the midst of brutal stories of slavery and bloody warfare there are signs of something much more powerful in chosen responses, in small kindnesses and in love itself.

Bishop Tutu on Nelson Mandela: "The truth is that the 27 years Madiba spent in the belly of the apartheid beast deepened his compassion and capacity to empathize with others. On top of the lessons about leadership and culture to which he was exposed growing up, and his developing a voice for young people in anti-apartheid politics, prison seemed to add an understanding of the human condition.

Like a most precious diamond honed deep beneath the surface of the earth, the Madiba who emerged from prison in January 1990 was virtually flawless.

Instead of calling for his pound of flesh, he proclaimed the message of forgiveness and reconciliation, inspiring others by his example to extraordinary acts of nobility of spirit.

A tribute echoed by many others, not arguing that violence is good or even redemptive, but rather bearing witness to a peaceable kingdom possible even now in our midst. So while we are bound inevitably to violence in many ways, so we, as followers of Jesus can choose responses that continue to unveil the destructive, dehumanizing myth that violence can ever be redemptive, just as was shown for all time in Jesus' death on the cross. The goal for all creation is not the love of power, but the power of love.

May we ponder all this in our hearts, responding to the gospel in silence and in prayer....