

Animal Crackers

December 9, 2007

(Advent 2 - Year A)

Isaiah 11: 1-10

St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas

On the Sunday evening before Thanksgiving, I was privileged to attend a very unusual worship service, a worship service celebrating the life of Ramona Ryan.

Ramona and her husband, Luis, have 3 children who are active in the Central Texas String Academy which we now host here at St. Alban's.

Their oldest daughter, Gwendolyn, is a very accomplished viola player. You will hear Gwendolyn lead the viola section in tonight's offering of Vivaldi's *Gloria* here at St. Alban's.

Anyway, Ramona, the mother of these 3 children in the String Academy, died last month of breast cancer at the age of 49.

The entire String Academy family deeply mourned Ramona's death.

And a celebration of the life of Ramona Ryan was held on the Sunday evening before Thanksgiving, out at the World Hunger Farm, near Connally High School.

I went to this celebration out of pastoral support for this family, who are so involved here in our Outreach Center.

Yet I was surprised by how powerfully I experienced a vision of God's kingdom there.

The service was held outdoors, under a big tent, almost like a circus tent. The family had asked everyone to come in festive colors, so I saw people of all shapes and sizes and colors in bright hats and sombreros and colorful shirts and dresses.

Ramona was an Anglo woman.

And her husband, Luis, is Hispanic.

And the gathering under the tent included people who were white, brown and black.

The words of the service were offered in both English and in Spanish.

During the service, one of Ramona's neighbors, an African-American man, spoke about how he and Ramona had become friends, about how they had sat down together many times to discuss the commonality of humanity that they shared, despite their differences in skin color.

The eulogy was given by Pastor Tom, an Hispanic minister at Mighty Wind Worship Center.

The music was a mix of traditional Christian hymns, Mexican folk music and Gospel songs.

Several pieces of music were offered by children in the Central Texas String Academy.

One family, who was from Africa, taught us an African folk song that Ramona loved, along with some dance steps that went with it.

Ramona's family played and sang a festive song, with words in Spanish, about a bird,

They whistled like a bird as they sang.

We ended the service by singing that old spiritual hymn of freedom:

"We Shall Overcome."

All of the various parts of this unusual outdoor worship service under this big tent were offered in a spirit of respect and celebration.

As I soaked in this extremely diverse celebration, I truly felt as if I was witnessing a vision, a glimpse, of the kingdom of God, the kingdom of God that Isaiah envisions in today's Old Testament reading.

In that reading, Isaiah speaks of the Messiah, the anointed leader, who is to come.

And this is Isaiah's vision of the new, peaceable kingdom under the Messiah:

"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...

They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain."

Isaiah's vision of what peace looks like is that the wolf, the lamb, the leopard, the calf, the lion, all will be able to live together and celebrate each other's differences, yet they will not eat each other up.

Isaiah's vision of what peace looks like is what I experienced under that big tent at Ramona's celebration, where rich, poor, black, white, Hispanic, African, celebrate each other's differences, yet do not eat each other up.

Isaiah's vision of what peace looks like - is like a box of Animal Crackers.

Certainly you remember the Animal Crackers that we used to eat when we were kids.

Animal Crackers come in a box that looks like a circus, with a string handle attached.

Since Nabisco began making animal crackers in 1902, there have been 37 different kinds of animals made into animal crackers.

Currently, Nabisco makes animal crackers in the shape of cougars, tigers, lions, bison, sheep, monkeys, camels and other animals, and puts them into its trademark box, that looks like a big circus tent.

And the animals live together peaceably in that box, and they do not eat each other up.

For inside that box of animal crackers.

“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.”

Inside that box of animal crackers,
The illegal immigrant shall live with the country club member,
The unwed mother shall live with the mayor,
The Anglo and the African-American and the Hispanic together.
They shall not hurt or destroy on all God's holy mountain.

In Isaiah's vision of a kingdom of peace,
Everyone celebrates together under one big circus tent,
Everyone lives in peace in one Animal Cracker box,
And a little child shall lead them.

When we read this Hebrew prophesy with our Christian eyes during
Advent, we see that the little child that Isaiah speaks about is Jesus.
Jesus, the Messiah, the Prince of Peace, lead us and teaches us how to
live together in God's peaceable kingdom.
Jesus teaches us how to live with each other, in the same box, under the
same tent, without eating each other up.

For the little child of Bethlehem grows up into an adult and leads us,
teaching us to turn the other cheek, even when we want to fight
back.

The little child leads us, teaching us to love our enemies.
This little child leads us, teaching us to love our neighbor as ourselves.
For we shall not hurt or destroy on all God's holy mountain.

Yet where the little child leads us is not where we always want to go.
Lambs want to hang out with other lambs.
Lions want to hang out with other lions.

But in the peaceable kingdom, in the kingdom of Jesus,
The wolf shall live with the lamb,
The leopard shall lie down with the kid,
And a little child shall lead them.

For the little child of Bethlehem will lead us into his zoo.
And we call God's zoo - the Church.

Because the gift of this zoo that we call the Church of Jesus Christ, is
that you can meet all kinds of animals in this diverse place of love.
We gather under this big tent, every week, in this place where wolves
and lambs live together, and do not eat each other up.

However, the bigger challenge is whether we will mix with other kinds

of animals when we leave here on Sunday mornings, or whether we will stick to our own kind.

Therefore, if your friends are all in your same age group, I encourage you to get to know people who are in a different age group.

If your friends are married, I encourage you to get to know people who aren't married.

If your friends are white, I encourage you to get to know people who have a different skin color.

Because, I guarantee you, that God's peaceable kingdom is deeply experienced, when the wolf lives with the lamb, and the leopard lies down with the kid.

God's peaceable kingdom becomes a reality when we do not hurt or destroy anyone,

When we celebrate together under God's big tent,

When we live together like animal crackers, in one box.

And our hope is that...

The little child *will* lead us.

AMEN.

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