

## ***Get Real***

**Isaiah 11:1-10**

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I received an email recently that had as its message line, “Abduction Precautions for Women.” I must say, it jumped out at me amidst the various emails from all of you, from friends, from stores advertising Christmas gifts and sales. I opened a few emails around it, approached it with wariness. Wondered whether I should open it at all. Was this a topic that I really wanted to hear about as I sat comfortably calm and relaxed, doing the work I needed to do? But the topic was one that insinuates itself into our attention. A topic that can have a tendency to make us feel guilty for not listening. A topic we should probably know about. So, cautious, I opened it.

It was like opening Pandora’s Box. The text was about 18 point type, in color, and bold. It leapt off the page. The elbow is the strongest point on your body. If you are close enough to use it, do! If a robber asks for your wallet and/or purse, do not hand it to him. Toss it away from you and run like mad in the other direction! If you are ever thrown into the trunk of a car, kick out the back tail lights and stick your arm out the hole and start waving like crazy. The driver won’t see you, but everybody else will. This has saved lives. As soon as you get into your car, in a parking lot, lock the doors and leave. Always take the elevator instead of the stairs. (Stairwells are horrible places to be alone and the perfect crime spot). If the predator has a gun and you are not under his control,

always run! The predator will only hit you (a running target) 4 in 100 times. And even then, it most likely will not be a vital organ. Run!

Needless to say, gone was my calm. Gone was my relaxed settling down to work. I could feel the bodily sensations. Heart thumping. Palms sweating. Mind flitting. Fear coiling itself in my stomach, making me feel a bit nauseous. And then the thoughts. How many times must I have avoided such fates through sheer fate or blind luck. How many times had I probably come closer than I would ever know to being the victim of a horrendous crime. I could see myself, having been thrown into the trunk of that car, helpless, arm stuck through the tail light, nobody seeing. The world was suddenly changed. Full of predators ready to pounce. Prey ready to be victimized. Me close to a horrible fate that a few minutes before I had been blissfully unaware of.

And then along comes Isaiah. Along comes today's text, and visions of the "Peaceable Kingdom" made so familiar to many of us by the American Quaker artist Edward Hicks. "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. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. 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."

Now, I don't want to sound too sacreligious in church. I don't want to overstep my bounds in interacting with this sacred text. I don't want to offend, especially given these well-loved words that are so much a part of many of our lives. But I do want to be

honest about my own response. So here it is. Here is what I would like to say to Isaiah: “Are you crazy? What can you possibly be thinking? Your words are very nice and all, they make me feel all warm and fuzzy inside, but what do they have to do with anything? What do they have to do with us? I wish I could believe them, but I’m sorry, Isaiah. You and I must live in different worlds. And I’m glad you’re not here to see the world we live in now. It *is* a world of predator and prey. Of oppressor and oppressed. Of violence, nation against nation, faith against faith. Of elections that seem impossible to resolve without the threat of civil war. Face it, Isaiah. We live in a cold hard world. You’re going to need to ‘get real’ if you’re going to have anything to say to us.”

I say all this to Isaiah in my head. I mean, I couldn’t really say it out loud in my office. Who might think *I* was crazy? I can just imagine all those Nutfield kids looking in my door and seeing the Associate Pastor talking to herself. It wouldn’t do a lot for our recruitment of new members or our stewardship campaign. And then, again in my head of course, I hear Isaiah talking back. “Lucy,” he says – he addresses me personally. “Lucy, what are *you* thinking? Don’t you know anything about history? Don’t you know what we were going through when I wrote those words? I heard about that email you read. About the need to protect yourself from all those predators out there. How do you think *we* felt, part of our nation already captured, and Jerusalem, our holy city Jerusalem, under constant threat. No protection at all. We were merely a place that happened to be in the way of others stronger and more powerful than we. I know about your September 11. Because I live with similar circumstances each and every day.”

Oh. Wow. My presumption came home to me. How could I have thought that I was the only one who was scared. Who lived in fear. How could I have thought that our

time in history was so radically different than any other time in history? How could I have thought that all predators were focused on me personally. Just waiting for me to dally a moment before stepping into my car. Fear is nothing new. And it's certainly nothing I, or my time in history, have a monopoly on. Fear is real. It lurks in every dark alley. It lurks in homes of domestic abuse. It is in the eyes of the soldiers fighting in Fallujah. It is in the rigid bodies of hospital patients hearing a latest diagnosis.

My thoughts were interrupted again by Isaiah's voice. "Lucy, do you believe in God?" I sputtered. Well, I'd better believe in God. Here I am, an ordained minister. I have this stole on. And I'm preaching to an entire congregation who are somewhat under the assumption that I believe in God. "No," he continued, "I mean do you really believe in God?" "Well, I think I do. I believe in a God who always seems to be with me. I believe in a God who can be really difficult, who challenges me to do things I may not want to do and to be someone I may not have thought to be. I believe in a God who has been amazingly there for me in times of crisis. I believe in a God who has shown me the way through some really tough times."

This time Isaiah looked directly and intensely into my eyes. "Ok, let me put it another way. I heard you saying to me, not very nicely I might add, to 'get real.' Well, now it's my turn. I need you to get real. Or, to put it another way, you've said all those nice things about God. But are they like the candles that get lit during the service in Advent only to get blown out in the cold December wind. Are they like the lights on the Christmas tree that come down in the concrete everydayness of January? Or is the God you come to worship here every Sunday at First Parish Church real?"

"Do you, Lucy, believe that God is real?"

“Ummm....”

“I’m asking you, Lucy, ‘do you believe that God is real?’”

“Well.....”

“Well, tell me. You have a choice here. What is the nature of this world? Is it a world of predator and prey? A world of elbows to fend off attackers? A world of shifting glances to make sure we miss nothing? Or is it a world in which God’s words are true. A world in which fear does not have ultimate sway. A world in which “the wolf *shall* live with the lamb.....the nursing child *shall* play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child *shall* put its hand on the adder's den. A world in which they will *not* be hurt or destroyed.....because the earth will be full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea.”

Isaiah left me then. I could feel him departing. He had made clear the choice. And he of all people knew how difficult it was. How important it was. He knew that it is a choice that takes a lifetime to answer over and over again. *Do we believe that God is real?* Today, let us answer, if not with our minds, if not even with our beliefs, with our bodies. Let us hold out our hands, let us receive the bread and the cup. Let us join together in being guests at the table hosted by Jesus. Let us feel God’s presence made real in Jesus. Let us join together as did Isaiah’s wolf and lamb, leopard and kid, calf and lion because already the earth is and is becoming full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea.

