



“Inspiration from the Couch”

Text: Isaiah 11:6-9

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

There have been so many losses this year - losses we never could have imagined when we gathered for this beloved ritual only a year ago. The unspeakable loss of life. The loss of financial security. The loss of cherished modes of education. The loss of confidence in our leaders. Big, major losses. And there have been lots of little losses too. Simple pleasures we took for granted - hugging a neighbor, lingering over coffee with friends at church, singing freely and spontaneously . . . like everyone else, our Lydia has endured a string of disappointments as one activity after another was cancelled, postponed indefinitely or shut down. The summer announcement that there would be no fall festival this year finally put her over the edge. She declared, “This is the worst 2020 ever.” No kidding. I imagine we all agree.

But I want to tell you about someone who would say this is the best 2020 ever. He would say the people are home all the time, they spend a lot of time on the couch, they have time to go on lots of walks, and their defenses are way down when it comes to table food. I can say with full confidence that Buckeye the dog LOVED quarantine. He’s not here today. But he is blessed with a capital B. If you are a pet person, or if you know a pet person, you may well have similar stories to tell. As we hunkered down, our pets became more important than ever. And even still as we cautiously move about more than in those early days, many of us carry unacknowledged anxiety and exhaustion at the seemingly endless pandemic stretching before us. A psychologist friend of mine told me, “there is nothing harder on the human nervous system than chronic uncertainty.” That was in April. And uncertainty promises to stretch well into 2021.

So for many of us, our pets are providing security and comfort in ways we didn't imagine we would ever need. Walking the dog, stroking the cat help to calm and comfort us. And caring for our pets gives us a sense of control we can't get any other way these days. Once when Jesus was criticized for healing on the Sabbath - violating the commandment not to work - he famously said, don't you feed and water your animals on the Sabbath? Caring for animals doesn't ever take a day off. Caring for animals is essential work. Even when the whole world is turned upside down, you still need to feed the fish, change the litterbox, walk the dog. And that little slice of normalcy helps to keep us sane. Such a crucial need have pets filled during this season that more and more pets have been adopted. Ask our Presbyterian vets Jessica and Roger - they are seeing lots and lots of newly acquired kittens and puppies in their practice. Some of you who are not pet people may have found some of this same strength and comfort in gardening - the principles are the same - caring for your flowers and vegetables can give you comfort and stability and a sense of normalcy.

So, if nothing else, today we give thanks that our pets and our gardens - however we experience the natural world - has carried us through and promises to continue to carry us through the uncertainties of this pandemic stretching before us for many months to come. Thank you God for Buckeye who is only too happy go for a walk or snuggle on the couch when I really can't do anything else. Thank you God for Rudy who comforts Lydia and brings her daily joy and companionship through the worst 2020 ever. Thank you God for the flowers that ask nothing more than some water and weeding to bring beauty to my environment.

We come today in gratitude.

And we come also in hope. Hope in God's shalom, the wholeness and well-being of all creation, beautifully envisioned by Isaiah - God's shalom, the wholeness and well-being of all creation is so much more than we allow ourselves to imagine. It's so much more than hoping we don't get sick, hoping the election is fair - this glorious - and some would say fanciful - vision is Isaiah's way of reminding us that God's heart, God's dream, God's promise are so much deeper and wider than we are capable of considering. The wolf will lie with the lamb, the calf, the lion, and the yearling together, led by a child while a toddler plays near a poisonous snake. The human ways of hurt and destruction will be no more.

It's as if Isaiah says, just close your eyes and imagine.

Imagine enemies coming together; imagine all creation - including its human members - motivated by peace, living in God's shalom, putting aside the ways of hurt and destruction. May this day not only comfort and reassure us, not only fill us with gratitude for the ways in which the natural world - especially pets - is sustaining us during these difficult days. But may this day also invite us to dream, to imagine, and yes, to hope. To dream and imagine God's shalom - the wholeness of all creation - the evaporation of the impulses to hurt and destroy - the lambs and yearlings filled with courage, and the wolves and lions filled with calm. Perhaps you have an inner narrative something like mine that says "that's crazy - things are BAD."

Today, just for a few minutes, we are invited to set that aside and drink in some hope, some peace, to ground ourselves afresh in God's peace and wholeness, to remember that there is more to life and more to faith than the troubles of these days. Maybe today you will allow yourself to dream and imagine as you spend time with your freshly blessed pet. Perhaps you will google the images of some animals or some great art like Edward Hicks' famous painting of the Peaceable Kingdom. Or maybe you'll turn to Nat Geo and take in a program about the majesty of God's creation.

The point is to let this day, this annual ritual, this time of worship reconnect us to hope. It's so easy to lose hope, especially as we realize the ways in which we have put too much faith in human systems - so sure elections would always be fair, so sure leaders would be trust-worthy and honorable, so sure our fellow citizens would be motivated by the greater good. It's easy to lose hope.

But we dare not, especially in these difficult and anxious days. We dare not lose our real hope. Hope in the one who created this carefully balanced creation, teeming with plants and animals, arachnids and insects, fish and birds and even people. As we focus today on our pets, may they inspire us again to hope in God's promises, hope in the unshakable values of our faith, hope in God's shalom. Surely only that hope with roots reaching back through generations of ancestors who knew times harder than these, surely that hope will help us to move forward as faithful, peaceful people setting an example of what it is to neither hurt nor destroy.

Every once in a while at my house we catch a glimpse of Rudy the cat and Buckeye the dog enjoying a physically close companionable moment together. They don't want us to know. And if we catch them, Rudy will quickly run away. It's as if we're not to believe that they could lie down together. We're meant to continue to believe in a world dominated by adversity. But we do glimpse it every now and then. And today's like that. A glimpse of the peaceable kingdom. A glimpse of God's shalom. A glimpse of the hope we need to carry on in faith another day. Amen.



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