

## "The Peaceful Kingdom"

by Dr. Mark Smith

December 13, 2009

Isaiah 11:6-10, Galatians 5:22

Isaiah paints an absolutely beautiful picture of how it will be when God's kingdom comes in all its fullness – it's a picture of a restored and renewed earth where peace rules the day. When the Messiah comes even the natural world will be transformed: predators and prey - the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the goat, the calf and the lion will all feed together and a little child will lead them. A child will play at the den of a poisonous snake. The lion will eat straw like an ox. When the Messiah comes, says the Lord, they will not hurt or destroy on all his holy mountain.

All the instruments and agents of death and destruction in this world will become instruments and agents of God's peace: swords will be turned into plowshares, sharp claws will be turned into helping hands, and nations will no longer try to devour one another but they shall all feed together upon the rich bounty of God. Can you imagine, long-standing enemies putting down their weapons once and for all, coming together to feed at a huge banqueting table where there is more than enough for everybody? That is how it will be when the Messiah comes in power at the end of time when *"the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea."*

The vision is magnificent. But you know, its really hard to keep the vision before you when there is so much conflict and violence in our world today. Its hard to believe in the coming of a peaceful kingdom when people today are acting like ferocious beasts, tearing at each other's throats, snarling and devouring each other. Every year at Christmas we proclaim cheerfully *"Peace on earth, good will toward all!"* But still the beasts rage and adversaries do battle. Arabs and Jews still fight each other. Al Queda still threatens. Gangs and drug pushers still rule many city streets. Conflict of one kind or another abounds in our homes and communities. It never seems to end. It's hard to hope for peace in such a world.

Woody Allen once said, *"The lion and the calf shall lie down together, but the calf won't get much sleep."* It's hard to trust the vision, when there is so much enmity and conflict around.

We know very well that the peaceful kingdom described by Isaiah has not yet come as God wills it to come. But one day it will. We are to have patience, for Peace shall reign. In the meantime we can pray for peace and work for peace.

But let me tell you where peace begins: it begins in our own hearts. The problem of violence and conflict and war is not just a political or a social problem; it's a spiritual

problem. There is warring going on in our own hearts--inside each of us. James in the New Testament asks:

*"But what about the feuds and struggles that exist among you? Can't you see that they arise from conflicting passions within yourselves?"*

These conflicting passions - these wild beasts within us - need to be tamed if there is ever to be external peace between people. The beasts cause us to do crazy things. They hurt and destroy.

Sometimes the angry lion inside gets the best of us. We lash out at others - even those we love most. Sometimes we are surprised by our own ferocity. There is an untamed aggression in some of us, a raging beast that destroys relationships. If unchecked, it can really go wild.

Some of us are more dominated by the passive lamb inside. Our problem may be lack of passion. We are timid and afraid half the time, playing the part of a victim. We cower through life. We fail to roar when we should roar. We lack power and courage and the lion-hearted love of Christ.

There are beasts of sexual passion that can get us into deep trouble if we let them get out of hand...

Tiger Woods is a case in point. Not to jump on Tiger, but he has been in the news so much, I think we can learn something from him. It's interesting how someone who is so disciplined and focused on the golf course, can be so undisciplined in his personal life. Apparently the wild beast of sexual passion was driving him for a long time, and because he hasn't been able to rein it in and tame it, it has caused untold harm to his family and to his reputation. The lack of peace in his heart led directly to a war with his wife. What irony, to be chased out of his own home with a golf club! What is that saying? *"Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned."*

What happened to Tiger can happen to us, if allow our passions to get out of hand. There are beasts inside of us that long for power and recognition and material wealth causing us to ignore or step on others. There is the green monster of envy and jealousy that lurks within as well...

All these things --these wild animal impulses -- these savage beasts - are at war in our hearts and need to be tamed and brought under control if we are to experience wholeness and real peace within and if we are to live in peace with others.

And how do you and I do that? How do we tame them? Not ultimately by following some strategy, or program or therapy. It is in fact nothing that we can do ourselves. The answer is to give ourselves into the care of Another.

The answer lies in a deep friendship with the One who is God's Messiah, who makes the wolf and the lamb to lie down together. Only Jesus Christ can tame the beasts within us.

Do you remember how he came one day to a self-destructive crazy man, a man who howled at night like a beast and cut himself with rocks? Jesus asked him, "*What is your name?*" And the man said, "*My name is legion for there are so many inside of me.*" And Christ drove out of him all the inner beasts that were making him crazy and restored him to his right mind. Only Christ can tame and integrate and harmonize our many warring selves to a whole self at peace. You and I need to invite him into our hearts, saying "*Lord, change me from the inside out. Only you can turn the beast within me into something beautiful. Only you can bring peace to my heart.*"

Do you know the most important thing that you can do for yourself? It is to enter into a deeper friendship with Christ by giving him the center place of your heart. It is to allow his Spirit to rule there, for "the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, *peace*." Perhaps that can happen for you this advent season.

Madeleine L'Engle, the author of *A Wrinkle in Time*, a famous children's book, has written another wonderful children's book called *Dance in the Desert*. It's the story of a young man and woman who long ago traveled through desert with their child.

They traveled with a caravan on their way to Egypt through a desert filled with ferocious animals. Some of their companions were afraid of the beasts, afraid especially that they might harm the child.

When night came and they were all sitting around the fire, a great lion appeared at the edge of the camp and everyone trembled. But the child held out his arms and the lion rose up on his hind legs and, of all things, began to dance. And then from the desert came running little mice and two donkeys and three eagles, a snake and great clumsy ostriches, a unicorn, a pelican, and even two dragons. And they all bowed to the child and they all danced together round and round him as he stood at the center and laughed with delight.

You know the name of that Child.... Let him stand at the center of your desert. Let all the beasts in you bow to him. Let your desires and impulses and passions dance to His tune. And the Child will lead them. Let him establish the Peaceful Kingdom in your heart. Amen.