

Isaiah 11:1-10 “Peace Sunday”

Back in 2012, we installed these video screens in the sanctuary. And, as you would expect, there were people who were excited about the idea, and there were people who were ... less enthused. I remember Jan Evans was one of the folks who didn't like the idea. She wasn't going to pick a fight about it or petition the board to put a halt to the plans for the project or anything. She just didn't like the idea, and she was going to say so because that was Jan. The worship committee and the board had already been wrestling with the idea for about a year. We toyed with the idea of having screens and projectors, but every AV company we consulted with said projectors and screens weren't going to work. There was no good place to put a screen that wouldn't obscure either the cross or the banners or the stained glass window. There wasn't even a good place to put a projector either. So one company said, “Why don't you just go with four flat screen monitors and mount them on these posts? They'll be brighter, they'll last longer than any projector you can buy and everyone in the sanctuary will be able to see them clearly.” We thought this was a pretty solid idea. Jan didn't. What purpose would they serve? We've got hymn books ... people don't need screens to sing. We've got banners ... people don't need to see some projected image. It will be distracting. It will ruin the traditional aesthetic of the church. What are we trying to do ... be like some rock and roll mega-church or something? We've survived without them for almost 60 years. Why change? We thanked her for her input and put the monitors in anyway because at the time, the majority opinion was that they were a good idea.

Two things happened very soon after we installed them. First of all, Katy Valentine moved to town and we invited her to preach. She used the video monitors quite effectively in her sermon. That Sunday, we won over a few more folks who weren't crazy about the idea because they saw the practical application of the screens. But Jan still didn't like them. But then, Charlie Phillips died. One of his children made a video presentation that we projected on the monitors during his service. Those

who were gathered for that service got to see video clips of the “Old Familiar Charlie” before dementia took over. There wasn’t a dry eye in the sanctuary that day. And right after the service, Jan came to me with a tear in her eye and said, “Okay. I see why we have those video monitors now. This was a good thing.”

A year and a few months later, Katy and I were working on the Christmas Eve candlelight service, and we came to the conclusion that using the video monitors wouldn’t work. We felt that having the words to “Silent Night” projected on the monitors would cause the room to be too bright and ruin the effect of having the room lit by candles. Guess who came to us after the service and asked, “Why didn’t you use the video monitors?” Yup. You guessed it. Jan. We told her why. She said, “Well then just flip it around and have white letters on a black screen and then it won’t be so bright! When we don’t have the monitors we can’t hear each other sing because everyone has their face buried in a bulletin while they’re trying to hold a candle and sing *Silent Night*. It just doesn’t work without the monitors!” And the following year, that’s exactly what we did. And Jan was happy. I miss her. I think of her often when I flip the “on” switch to the monitors. She wasn’t on board with the vision at first, but when she saw the practical application, she was behind the project 100%. She just wasn’t able to catch the vision when the folks on the worship committee announced the project. It took her awhile.

So let’s talk about people who proclaim new visions. Let’s talk about those who say, “Here’s something to look forward to!” Those people are often seen as either crackpots or unrealistic dreamers. When Isaiah announced the vision Tom read earlier, I imagine he got the same sort of reaction. The wolf will lie down with the lamb? The leopard will rest with the young goat? Children will play with poisonous snakes? Leaders will speak with truth and with humility? Riiight. How do you expect anyone to believe this? It sounds like fantasy! These things have never even happened before. Well ... I’ve seen kids on National Geographic play with snakes, but leaders who speak with truth and

humility? That's a tough sell. These things defy comprehension. Isaiah was either crazy or a scam artist. Like one of these ads you see for a magic pill that will make you fit and beautiful without exercising. Or a face cream that will make you look 20 years younger or cure baldness. I always tell my kids, "If you see a deal that *looks* too good to be true, it probably *is* too good to be true."

This reality that Isaiah is talking about sounds pretty strange. But here's something to think about - Our beliefs about the limits of reality get very tangled up with what we *expect* or what we have *experienced* before. What seems like something outside reality in one place or time is taken for granted in another. People who thought that the world was round were once committed and locked up because they'd clearly lost the ability to function in the "real" world. People in South Africa who thought Nelson Mandela would be President someday were often given a dose of "reality" in a Johannesburg prison cell. But if Mandela could be President, who's to say that a leopard couldn't lie down with a goat.

Beware of those who want to define reality for you. Beware of those who tell you what is or isn't realistic. If someone else is trying to define the limits of your reality, you need to ask yourself, "What is it that they've invested in holding on to *this* present reality?" Why would they be threatened if we believed that something was possible that just isn't in place yet. Here's an example: Why do people in the fossil fuel industry tell us that investing in alternate energy sources is unrealistic? Easy. There's money to be made and power to be maintained by holding onto that old reality. There are vested interests to be protected. People can't be allowed to believe that it's possible for your product, or your regime, or your world view to become useless. You've always got to ask who's backing a particular view of the world. Follow the money and you'll have your answer. And this manipulation of our perception of reality doesn't just happen on the world stage over the big issues. How many times have you come up with a great idea only to have someone say, "No way ... it can't be done! It's unrealistic for you to think you can ever move the communion table from the chancel to the floor."

How many times have you said, “I’m going to set my intention on being a less critical person,” only to have someone say, “Ha! You’ll always be like that. That’s the way you’ve always been. Get your head out of the clouds, this is the real world. This is your box. Get real and accept it.”

So ... if somebody’s saying this to you, you’ve got to ask why. You’ve got to ask, “What is this person’s payoff for keeping me in the cage of my old view of reality?” Again ... follow the money. Or in this case, follow the vested interest of the one who wants to keep you in the cage. Maybe its nothing more than the fear of seeing someone else achieve what they were afraid to try! Maybe it’s worse ... maybe it’s more sinister. Either way, always be wary of anyone who wants to define your dreams as being outside the realms of reality.

Sometimes the difficulties we have embracing a new vision of reality are not external. They’re not always somebody else with a vested interest. Some of these demons are within us. Often we’re just resigning ourselves to the inevitability of unchanging cycles. We’ve heard so often that history repeats itself and that the more things change the more they stay the same, that we take it for granted that the way things are is pretty much the only way they can be. Our experience of the world determines the limits of our vision. “I’ve never seen a leopard change its spots, therefore it can’t.” Or, “I’ve never seen the lion lay down with the lamb, therefore it couldn’t happen.” Or “I’ve never known someone you could really trust, therefore there *isn’t* anyone you can really trust.” “I’ve never been able to change this pattern in my life, therefore I never will.”

We end up as our own worst enemies with a mixture of fear and lack of vision conspiring from within us to hold us in the prison of our present circumstances. The voices whisper at us, “Every time you’ve tried to get out of this before you’ve failed. Don’t risk being a failure again. You can dream your dreams, but they’re only dreams. You always have to go back to reality when you wake up. Back to the real world where nothing ever changes.”

The realm of the possible is always bigger than we think it is. We've gotten used to the fact that the impossible keeps on becoming possible in the world of science and technology. It's true in the realms of psychology and personal relationships and social systems too. If your relationships have always been disasters, it doesn't mean that you're not capable of having good relationships. It may just mean that you've been approaching them wrong. If a mountain climber fails to conquer a particular peak, they usually try a different route the next time. Just because it can't be done this way doesn't mean that it can't be done. The fact that there are still wars going on in the world today doesn't mean that the lion can never eat straw with an ox. It just means we haven't found the way to peace ... yet.

Before Jesus came along, the common belief was that you were only acceptable to God if you were a descendent of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Then Jesus came and said it *could* be possible if you believed it and trust God for it. He called us to take up the vision of Isaiah, to look for the day when there would be justice for the needy and equity for the poor. Jesus lived and died to let us know that you can expect better than just more of the same. He was raised from the dead to show that even death no longer means the end of hope. Even death can no longer limit the scope of reality. The Risen Christ has kicked open the doors of all our prisons. We are free to believe what was once thought impossible. But the prisoner whose dreams and vision have never extended beyond the closed door will be unable to face the prospect of venturing beyond it. For Jesus's sake let's not stay sitting in the back of our cells unwilling to go through the open door because we've given up hope! The same Jesus who kicked down the door is also promising to travel with us beyond the door. Maybe you've never seen beyond the door, but there is a beautiful world waiting ... a world where the lion will lay down with the wolf. A world where snake pits are safe playgrounds for children. A world of justice for the poor, freedom for the oppressed, and comfort for the broken hearted. Come, Lord Jesus, Prince of Peace ... come.