

IMAGINE
Isaiah 11:1-10
Matthew 3:1-12
Second Sunday in Advent, 2016
Sunrise Presbyterian Church
Martha Murchison

"Imagine" - John Lennon sings - "Imagine no possessions/I wonder if you can/No need for greed or hunger / A brotherhood of man/ Imagine all the people sharing all the world." Imagine! For those of us who are of a certain age these lyrics stop us in our tracks and almost beg us to sing along. Imagine. This week I saw a video of this song performed by deaf youth signing the lyrics over a spoken voice. They imagined singing in a choir - their song reminded me of hopes and visions I have known throughout my life. And their song called me to sing along: "You may say I'm a dreamer/ But I'm not the only one. /I hope someday you'll join us/And the world will be as one."

I've long been a dreamer. I was told during my first week in my first congregation that my problem was that I wanted to save the world - it still is - I still have hope, and I join the host of other dreamers who imagine new possibilities or different realities for our world. Advent is a season for dreamers. It's a time to look out into the darkness of the world and hope.

The prophet Isaiah was a dreamer. He looked out and saw things as they were - and then he imagined how they could be seen through God's eyes. He imagined a leader filled with the spirit of the Lord: honoring the meek - nurturing the poor - filled with righteousness. Isaiah penned poems about this leader and in his most beautiful poem, he envisioned creation at peace with itself. The wolf and lamb - natural enemies - slept together - the cow and bear graze together - yes graze together - because the animals are vegetarian in this dream - they don't hurt or kill one another - they live together in such peace that young a 2 year old can play with a nest of rattlesnakes. There is calm - there is peace - there is no fear. There is a quiet knowledge of God. The peaceable kingdom is perhaps the most powerful vision in scripture. It is, after all, what God wants for us.

Yet, perhaps it seems trite after all these years. We've read these lines over and over. We've seen the paintings. In a world that often feels fraught with fear and mired in cruelty, we are desperate for peace - but we need a fresh vision.

I heard a fresh take on Isaiah this week through the story book we read at God's Kids, *The Winter Train*. The story begins in the Northern Forest at the beginning of winter. The animals scurry to pack for their trip to the Southern

Forest on the Winter Train. The Wild Cat can't find his toothbrush. The deer can't fit his things into his suitcase. The rabbit does not want anyone to forget to turn out the lights. They pack and meet at the foot of the oldest tree to wait for the train to take them away from the cold and snow. When the train arrives - the animals pile on. The goat sits with the wolf. The bat sleeps in the coat closet. All is happy and fun when the beaver realizes that they have left the squirrel behind. They've left the squirrel who eats all our birdseed - who makes a mess of things - who makes all kinds of racket - they've left the squirrel and nothing will do except that they stop the train so that the beaver can go back through the falling snow to get the squirrel. "You came back to rescue me!" Squirrel exclaims to the beaver. He'd overslept and missed the train. Beaver and squirrel make it back to the train through the heavy snow. It takes all of the animals to clear the snow from tracks - and train finally begins to move south toward warmth. As night falls on the train - Squirrel curls up under the warmth of Eagle's huge wings and falls asleep.

Now you may say I'm dreamer. But I don't think I'm the only one who can see possibilities for our lives through this winter tale of animals who would be enemies curled up asleep on a train. Is there a squirrel we've forgotten? Someone who may have been left out? Have we risked ourselves to rescue that squirrel? Have we thought about what it would take for us to seek out and care for those who, like Squirrel, have been forgotten? Have we held hands with someone who frightens us? Have we like the goat dared to sit by the wolf? Have we looked at those we fear through the eyes of love? Have we reached out to offer warmth to someone who is afraid? Have we sought to comfort them?

This vision is hardly like Isaiah's vision, yet it offers us more places for us to get inside it and make it our own. Isaiah's dream is cosmic. The Winter Train can be pretty local. It offers us some things we can do - this week.

We often dismiss John the Baptist's ranting in the wilderness as so much hellfire and damnation we'd like no part of. Yet the repentance John calls us to make is not a cursory giving up of vices - instead John calls us to *metanoia* - to turn *around*. John calls us to turn around in our lives and live them towards God's vision. John calls us to live into the world Isaiah describes - no matter that our world is fearful and violent - John calls us to live into the peaceable kingdom. And one thing more: John calls us to be fruitful -- he asks us to bear the fruit of peace - to go back for the squirrels that are left behind - he asks us to hold hands with those who are afraid - he asks us to lift up the poor - to befriend the meek. John the Baptist calls us to turn the world around.

Now you may say I'm a dreamer - But I'm not the only one. I hope you'll join me so the world can be as one. Alleluia! Amen.

