

Unlikely Friends

A Sermon for Morning Worship with Communion on the Second Sunday in Advent
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

December 4, 2016

Texts: Isaiah 11:1-9

I admit I am not a big fan of Disney movies as a general rule and why is a conversation for another time. But I confess there is one Disney movie I really love and that is *Finding Nemo*. I love *Finding Nemo* because it teaches important lessons about things that sometimes get lost in our busy lives, like the importance of taking risks and being willing to pay the consequences. Like the importance of hope, hope that if you believe in something and keep working at it, no matter what it takes, you can overcome incredible obstacles. One of the genius aspects of *Finding Nemo* is the short little sayings various characters come up with along the way to keep Nemo's father encouraged in his long journey through unfamiliar oceans in search of his missing son. Dory's "just keep swimming" has come to my mind and my lips on more than a few occasions when things have gotten rocky and the need to just keep moving forward in spite of difficulties expected and unexpected has been paramount.

One of my favorite moments centers on another of these pithy sayings. It's early on in the film when Nemo's dad and Dory are just beginning to search for the missing Nemo. They're swimming along when they encounter a sunken ship. I seem to recall it as a submarine but perhaps it was a regular ship, resting

on the ocean bottom. I honestly don't remember. What I do remember is the large shark and his little friend, the pilot fish, who were in the sunken ship just about to kick off their "predators' anonymous" meeting. It seems the shark was really trying to change who he was because he didn't like everyone he encountered being so afraid of him. As their meeting, which had only the two of them, began, they repeated the pledge one had to make to join the group – "Fish are friends, not food." Maybe it was the shark's Australian accent. Maybe it was that his little pilot fish friend was so intent on helping him make and keep the pledge. For whatever reason, when I watched the shark raise his front fin and say, "Fish are friends, not food," I just lost it. I was laughing so hard I couldn't breathe. The whole idea of a shark thinking he could just decide he wasn't going to eat fish anymore was just preposterous! And, it soon proved impossible when during his encounter with Nemo's dad and Dory, he suddenly found himself with an overwhelming desire to gobble them both up. "Fish are friends, not food" may have been this shark's best intention, but he just couldn't do it when the chips were down. He could not overcome his predator nature no matter how badly he wanted to have fish as friends instead of a meal. He was a predator, a big toothed, scary, ferocious predator no matter how much he hoped to be something else.

I was thinking of this scene from *Finding Nemo* as I was pondering today's text from Isaiah in which a whole list of predators and their prey in the animal kingdom appear in the midst of much the same dilemma as the shark in *Finding Nemo*, the predator confronting its prey with an unconventional outcome. Isaiah describes a wolf lying down with a lamb and a leopard lying down with a baby goat and nothing happens except perhaps a little cuddling. A calf and a lion and a fatling or yearling all take a walk together led by a little child and nothing happens! No one gets attacked. No one gets eaten. And Isaiah doesn't stop there. He describes a toddler playing next to the hole of an asp, one of the deadliest snakes around. A pre-schooler puts its hand right into the adder's den, another deadly snake, and nothing happens. What a fantastic scene! What an impossible scenario it outlines! What was Isaiah thinking anyhow?

To understand that, we need to realize the context in which Isaiah was writing these words, making his prophecies to the people of ancient Israel. Their kingdoms had been utterly defeated by their enemies and their lives were literally in ruins. How could this possibly have happened to God's chosen people? This was the question Isaiah was tasked with answering, with explaining, to the people and the text we read this morning is part of his answer. God's people had been totally and completely defeated. And they had not expected this to happen. The people

were bereft. They were inconsolable. They were lost in a sea of fear and hopelessness. It is to these broken and frightened people that God commanded Isaiah to speak. And what was his message? That new life, new beginnings, new possibilities are always, always, *always* emerging because of, in the midst of, God's unending love for God's people.

This text begins with the extraordinary image of a tree stump, all that was left of a tree no longer alive – or so it seemed. And yet, a shoot – a vigorous if small green shoot was emerging right from the center of the dead stump. This green shoot of new life is emerging from what Isaiah calls the stump of Jesse. So, who's Jesse? The father of King David to whom God had promised long ago that his descendants would reign over God's people forever. So, God is promising that, appearances notwithstanding, the ancestors of David would still see that long ago promise fulfilled. Important to note here is that this text is read in two different ways by Christians and Jews and each must respect the readings of the other. We Christians tend to forget that our Old Testament is the Jewish people's Holy Book – the Torah – too. When they read this text from Isaiah they see it as referring to the long promised messiah, *who has yet to come*. To them, God's promise is still in the process of being fulfilled. For Christians, on the other hand, when we read this text, we see clear references to Jesus whom we believe is the long awaited Messiah.

“The Spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord.” To us, these words obviously describe Jesus. That’s why we read this very text during Advent – as preparation, as reminder, of who *we believe* Jesus was always intended to be as the promised Messiah. This reading of the text is not wrong but neither is the Jewish reading of the text as a description of the leader, the Messiah, they still await. The great thing about this text, and indeed much of the bible, is that there is plenty of room for both faiths to read and interpret this text as we feel led to do by our respective religious traditions. God doesn’t put any restrictions or limitations on how this text can or should be read. Humans do that all on their own.

But then again, that’s just human nature. We’re always trying to make meaning out of the circumstances and situations in which we find ourselves. It’s human nature to want to understand what is confusing, to make sense out of the nonsensical, to set boundaries on what’s right and wrong. It’s human nature to see what we want to see in the circumstances around us, to read into things what we expect to find there. And that’s exactly what Isaiah is addressing in his prophecy to the people. Don’t be bound by what makes sense to you in the moment, Isaiah is saying. Don’t look at everything that’s wrong and feel hopeless. Don’t look at everything that’s broken, convinced it can never be

fixed. In fact, Isaiah says, do just the opposite. Look at the dead tree trunk and see the tiny shoot of new life bursting from the death. Dare to believe that God can and does and will re-order the very laws of nature if that's what it takes to accomplish God's will. Dare to believe that enemies can become friends, that wolves and lambs can cuddle while calves and lions wander through the meadow led by a little child too small to see over the grass. Dare to believe that the most unlikely, impossible and improbable can happen, Isaiah says, because when God wills it, and we cooperate, that's exactly what happens. Enemies can become unlikely friends, and even allies, when we are willing to let go of our own biases and presuppositions to see God's possibilities all around us.

Perhaps you've heard about the current protests happening at the Standing Rock reservation in North Dakota. The Standing Rock Sioux tribe is protesting that the Dakota Access Pipeline which was diverted from its original planned route near Bismarck, ND because of fears of what could happen to the city's water supply in the event of an oil leak. That is precisely their fear of what will happen to their sacred lands as well as their water supply if the pipeline considered too hazardous to route through a white man's city comes instead through their lands. They have been protesting the pipeline for months, effectively bringing all construction to a halt. These peaceful protests have now grown to include representatives of Native American tribes from all over

the United States and Canada. Local law enforcement has grown increasingly strident in its response, with some serious injuries to protestors resulting. Many groups have come to support the Standing Rock Sioux. Clergy groups converged on Standing Rock at the beginning of November and as 500 clergy of all faiths, including several UCC clergy from New England, gathered at Standing Rock, the police pulled back. And they stayed away the whole week the clergy were there only to return after their departure armed with water cannon used in sub-freezing temperatures. Now a new group is offering support to the Standing Rock Sioux. This group is a perfect example of what happens when unlikely friends stand together. A group of 2000 veterans of the US military are converging on Standing Rock to give the Standing Rock Sioux a break from the relentless attempts to drive them off their sacred lands. Think about that for a minute. 150 years ago it was the US military hunting down the Standing Rock Sioux as the white settlers moved westward. Today it is 2000 veterans of the US military standing between the Sioux and the water cannons. In effect, the cavalry is riding again only this time they are coming to protect the Native Americans instead of attack them. Unlikely friends indeed.

So what is Isaiah asking us to do as we consider God's promise of peace this second Sunday in Advent? Well, Isaiah is asking us to realize that with God, new life and new beginnings

are always happening – especially in the most unlikely places in the most surprising ways. Also, Isaiah reminds us that peace is only possible when justice for the poor and the meek is granted as easily and as fully as it is for those who already have power, wealth and position. So, it would seem that Isaiah wants us to understand that, impossible as it may seem – like a wolf and a lamb cuddling or a toddler playing with a deadly snake – we are to be the peace our families, our communities, our world needs instead of waiting for someone else to do it. We are to dare to be unlikely friends to the people who most need our help – the poor, the meek, the frightened, the confused, the sick, the marginalized whoever they are. In other words, dear friends, we are to do more than dream of peace. We are to make peace real by confronting injustice when we see it in big ways and small. We do this every time we offer a smile and kind word when someone is hurting. We do this every time we see injustice and speak up against it. We do this by being the people God needs us to be, every moment of every day. We are to be the people of hope, the people of peace, the people of light and love and kindness, the people of Jesus, even and especially when they are unlikely friends, people most different from us. Being unlikely friends to unlikely people is our challenge from God this Advent and every day. Difficult? Yes. Are we up to it? Isaiah seems to think so and so do I. Amen.