Dual Citizenship: The Kingdom is Within

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

Isaiah 11:1-10 ~ November 27, 2022

With the exception of a few years, I’ve been a church-goer my entire life. Church has shaped the rhythm of my life. Even so, I am often struck by how odd it is, that we do this, that we gather in this way to do the things we do. Among the most startling – and life-giving – is that we routinely enter another world. Or, if not enter, we at least hear about, contemplate and imagine. As if we take a little voyage, dwell for a time in some other world, then carry on in this world.

The prophet Isaiah draws one of the most enduring and alluring images. He is speaking to a people whose future has seemingly been cut off, as the stump of a tree. The spirit of God will bring about a new order, fill the rulers with justice, then offers us this invitation:

The wolf shall live the with the lamb,

the leopard shall lie down with the kid,

the calf and the lion and the fatling together,

and a little child shall lead them.

The cow and the bear shall graze,

their young shall lie down together;

and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain;

for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord

as the waters cover the sea.

Hearing these words, do we not go there too? As in a dream, almost everything about this other world is different. A lion and a calf together? In what universe? Isn’t that contrary to their very nature? Even this brief foray into a land portrayed and drawn upon our hearts by the eternal messengers of God is enough to give us pause, to invite us to ponder anew this world – and our lives in it – in a different light.

The poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge poses the question this way:

What if you slept  
And what if in your sleep you dreamed  
And what if in your dream you went to heaven  
And there plucked a strange and beautiful flower  
And what if when you awoke you had that flower in your hand  
Ah, what then?

I wonder if or how others might see that we carry a flower plucked from heaven. Can others tell that we’ve been spending time in God’s peaceable kingdom? Do we carry ourselves differently? Hold things a bit more gently?

Quaker Thomas Kelly quotes mystic Meister Eckhart who wrote: “As thou art in church or cell, that same frame of mind carry out into the world, into its turmoil and fitfulness.” Kelly continues, “Deep within us all there is an amazing inner sanctuary of the soul, a holy place, a Divine Center, a speaking Voice, to which we may continuously return. Eternity is at our hearts, pressing upon our time-torn lives, warming us with intimations of an astounding destiny, calling us home unto Itself. Yielding to these persuasions, gladly committing ourselves in body and soul, utterly and completely, to the Light Within, is the beginning of true life…. It is Light Within which illumines the face of God and casts new shadows and new glories upon the face of [humankind]. It is a new seed stirring to life if we do not choke it…. Here is the Slumbering Christ, stirring to be awakened, to become the soul we clothe in earthly form and action. And Christ is within us all.” (A Testament of Devotion)

Jesus taught that we can enter this land anytime. When you pray, said he, go into your inner room, pray in secret; God will hear you in secret. Yet, about this teaching: no house in Jesus’ day had an inner room. Jesus is teaching, when you pray, go into ***your*** inner room. The Peaceable Kingdom is within – where the little child plays at the adders den, and the cow and the bear graze together.

Turn, says the Baptist; repent from living as you are living today. Live differently. In her song Mary announces reversal as fulfillment: the mighty cast down, the lowly lifted up, the rich empty, the hungry filled. At every turn, Jesus taught, the kingdom of God is like… and then he went on. It is like a woman who lost a coin, or a merchant in search of a pearl, or a wedding banquet, or a mustard seed, or treasure hidden.

My desire this morning is not to persuade you of anything. I want to stand with you, in awe of this mystery, this gift of space and spirit: Each of us dwells with dual citizenship, with one foot in this land and one foot in the land of holiness.

This is not escapism, not an invitation to pretend the woes of this world are no more. No. Our citizenship is dual. We still have our lives, our relationships, a world in great need of our engagement and love. But we may be different within this space. by dwelling for a time within where God is at the center, not our egoic selves. From that point on, everything else works in reverse; the economy is not about getting, or getting ahead; it is about sharing. There is no shortage of anything so we have nothing to fear, nothing to cling to. There is neither oppressor nor oppressed; neither rich nor poor. Most remarkably, we find ourselves reassured of God’s deep abiding love. Reassured tangibly, in our gut: that we are lovely, lovable, loved – even just like this, as we are, individually and collectively. Even the animals behave differently.

For many summers, our son Nick spent time at a camp in Vermont. Each year, Sarah and I took note: he came back different. Not simply refreshed, but restored, somehow more whole; a beauty within shone more brightly. He engaged us and others with a better sense of who he was, who he is. I’d like to think that on a good day, after worship, others around us might note, you seem well today; Ledlie seems well today; present, clear, caring, more fully here. Carrying the flower apparently plucked from the inner kingdom.

Marcus Borg tells the story of a three year old girl whose parent’s gave birth to a second child, a little boy. Soon after returning home from the hospital with her new baby brother, the little girl asked if she could go into his room to be alone with him. At first uneasy, reluctant, the parent’s realized they could listen carefully with a baby monitor. They heard as their daughter enter the room, walked across to her brother’s crib, then heard her ask, “Tell me about God. I’ve almost forgotten.”

“It is strange to be here,” writes poet John O’Donohue. “The mystery never leaves you alone. Behind your image, below your words, above your thoughts, the silence of another world awaits. A world lives within you. No one else can bring you news of this inner world.” (Anam Cara)

Let us pray.

Call us to yourself, dear God. Help us to be still. And, in the stillness, to breathe deeply of your life giving Spirit. Call us to turn, dear God, first within. To dwell in your presence. Call us to turn, dear God, now without, to embrace the world in your love. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.