

God's Revolution

December 4, 2022

Isaiah 11:1-10

When you hear the word “revolution,” what comes to mind? Some of you might think about the Founding Fathers and colonialists, those who fought valiantly for separation from England and a Parliament that taxed us heavily without ever actually representing us. For others, you might think of MLK, Rosa Parks, Ruby Bridges, and other prominent figures of the Civil Rights Movement, marching, picketing, and protesting for an end to segregation and racism in all of its forms, a fight that is still going on. For me as a Millennial, I hear this word and I think about CNN reports about politicians like Berny Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, self-identified Democratic Socialists, along with the Democratic Socialists of America, all of whom are fighting to undo what they call the injustices of our Capitalist system. Regardless of who or what you think of when you hear this word, there is one key theme to all of these revolutionaries, all these revolutions, and that is a deep-seeded calling to point out the injustices of a given society, all in the hopes of eliciting change and instituting justice. The reading from Isaiah for today is no different.

Contrary to popular belief, Isaiah is not simply prophesying as we think of the word. That is to say he is not reading this nation's fortune and telling the future. Rather, Isaiah speaks here to a people that are on the cusp of being overthrown and sent into exile, who have on the whole severely angered God to where They are planning to drive the Tribes of Israel out of the Promised Land. It comes as no surprise, then, that there is something invariably wrong with society in his place and time. Many in that day were understandably desperate for some glimmer of hope onto which to hold, some peace that might reside in their hearts and help them to persevere. Thus, in response, Isaiah here speaks to an unjust society of a future where such injustices are no more, where peace and justice are known to all. Lions are grazing with cattle, and wolves and sheep are cozied up together. Children and venomous snakes coexist harmoniously without one causing harm to the other. What's more, the one who leads the people to this new future is not some older, wise sage, a well-respected father figure in the community, but rather is a small child. So to speak, Isaiah here is saying that a revolution is about to happen, one that God will bring to fruition. However, this raises a big question: If people are being unjust towards one another, why does Isaiah here speak of “lions” and “snakes” instead?

As it turns out, Isaiah here, in speaking of predatory creatures and venomous snakes, actually is talking about more than just the literal animals. In fact, he's not talking about the literal animals at all. Rather, he's talking about people, specifically those people that have incurred God's wrath. In speaking about predatory creatures, Isaiah rather is speaking about those in positions of power, those who oppress and prey upon others, consuming endlessly and reaping what is not theirs. As for the venomous snakes, Isaiah here is talking about false prophets and false shepherds, those that poison the truth by spreading rumors and falsehoods, misleading others, and concealing the truth. In other words, those who have and are preying upon others will soon no longer be preying upon them, and those who “poison the water” with falsehoods and rumors will no longer be spreading such lies. In short, those injustices that presently are will no longer be in this coming age. What of the child, though?

Isaiah's prediction that "a child shall lead them" seems like a bit of a divergence from this imagery of the animals. However, it runs parallel, essentially driving at the same point that "the powers that be will be upended." Consider the character of this predicted child. It would be born into and raised in this same system as presently is. The child would be raised in a Jewish, patriarchal society. Male dominance, Jewish customs, Middle Eastern customs, these would be the foundations on which this child's scope of the world would be built. However, despite this child's upbringing, despite injustices existing in the world into which they are born, this wouldn't prevent the child from seeing the flaws present in their society, from having ideas of their own. This child would see the faults of the power structures in this world, the prevalence of "predators" and "snakes," and seek to make the world a better place. In other words, seeing what is wrong with the world, this child would "rally the troops" to revolt, to bring about a change for the benefit of all society.

Understandably, then, this serves as a word of reassurance for those who are preyed upon and oppressed. Their suffering will soon be over. No more will they be pushed to the margins and overlooked. Such news gives them hope for this future that is to come and peace to know that God is with them amidst their trials. However, this also has the possibility of striking others differently, as the crowd would have been both predators and prey. For the "predators" and the "snakes" in the crowd, this would be a revelation that shakes them at their core. They were peaceful being on top, having their way all the time, but now they are being told their world is about to be turned upside down. The world that they were able to relax and be worry-free within is about to crumble down around them. Understandably, they want that peace they had back. This could mean, then, one of two things. One reaction is, out of this newly-felt fear, out of not wanting to get the short end of the stick when this all goes down, they repent from their ways. They tell the truth, as hard as it might be to tell, and admit to falsehoods they have spread. They lift up those who are put down and use their power in society to fight the good fight, to lift up and help the marginalized. Conversely, the other reaction is they dig their heels into the ground, double down on their ways, and essentially say, "I will do everything in my power to prevent this from happening. I will do whatever it takes to ensure I stay on top and this man's words are nothing more than a hollow threat." However, such resistance would not be to the "will of the people," but rather the "will of God."

In all that Isaiah predicts, it is God who is at work and making these things happen. God raises the child out of the house of Jesse, and God empowers the child to lead Their people. This world where predators and prey live harmoniously, where only truth exists, this is God's vision for humanity. God is the one actively working to resist the powers that be and working to break them down that all might thrive equally and harmoniously. Therein lies the greatest hope onto which to hold, a hope so great so as to instill peace: that God is not just sitting idly by and letting bad things happen, but is actively working against and breaking the powers of the elite. God is leading a revolution against the status quo and its injustices, and those that benefit from the current structures would be wise to repent rather than resist. However, as with all revolutions, there are two sides: those that are revolting against injustices, and those that are working to maintain those injustices. The first side sees injustices and calls them out where they are, and the other side blinds itself to injustices, saying things like, "That's not my problem" or "What can I possibly do?" The former fights for peace for all while the latter fights for peace for some. The revolution is happening, even now. Which side are you on?