“And a Little Child Shall Lead Them”
A Weaving of Sermon and Prayer at the First Congregational Church of Buxton, UCC
Communion Sunday/Second Sunday in Advent – December 5, 2010
By Rev. Karen Christensen

Scripture: Isaiah 11:1-9
(Read dramatically - interspersed with the choir's singing
of the hymn, "Isaiah the Prophet Has Written of Old" -
by Pamela Ryan, who also reads the prayers below.)

Shall we pray [sing] together? May the words of our mouths and the thoughts of
our hearts be acceptable to you, God our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen. Amen.

As we gather on this Second Sunday in Advent, we allow ourselves to be drawn
into the timeless story of the birth of Jesus, the Christ. With Christians throughout the
world we anticipate the impending birth, the coming of this infant boy who carries on his
tiny shoulders the hopes of the earth.

God of all Hopefulness, on this Second Sunday in Advent we have set the
Candle of Hope aflame. Set us afire, too, we pray, with the light of hope, the
anticipation of something new and future-leaning, drawing us toward greater
kindness and understanding, drawing us toward peace.

Because scripture traces his lineage back to King David, whose father was
Jesse, we think of Jesus when we read this poetic prophecy of a shoot that shall grow
out of the stump of Jesse. Because we know the stories of the man he became, we
think of Jesus when we read of a leader upon whom the spirit of wisdom and
understanding rests, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear
of the LORD. Because we celebrate this in him, we think of Jesus when this future king
is especially concerned with the poor and the meek of the earth. Because it is Advent,
because our reliving of his birth is just a few weeks out on the horizon, because at this
time of year we remember that he comes as a helpless newborn, we think of Jesus
when we hear that “a little child shall lead them.”

God of Expectancy, like Mary, smiling to herself as she cradles her unborn
baby on her way to Bethlehem astride a donkey, may we too allow ourselves this
quiet sense of possibility, this trusting hope in what the future holds for us, for all
creation.

Biblical scholar, Walter Brueggemann¹, writes of his angry dismissal of the
images of peaceful promise here in this passage from Isaiah. He says, “Unheard of and
unimaginable! All these images of unity sound to me so abnormal that they are not
worth reflecting on.” He speaks, of course, of wolves living with lambs, of leopards and
kids lying down together, cows and bears grazing in the same pasture. He speaks of a
world so utterly trustworthy that a mother will allow her child to play over the hole of a
poisonous snake. Can we agree with Brueggemann? Absurd! – these exaggerated
pictures of peace? Absurd!

¹ Quoted by Kate Huey in her reflections on this passage at SAMUEL, Sermon Seeds online commentary
at UCC.org.
God of the Absurd, God of the Impossible Possibility, help us to realize that it is our world - greedy for power and wealth whatever the cost to others - it is this world that is abnormal.² Help us to immerse ourselves in the images of this passage, images of peaceful co-existence between former enemies, images of trust we can barely fathom, images of a world fully and gladly plunged into a sea of gentleness.

Can we imagine such a world for ourselves? A world where mortgage lenders counsel their clients on the wisdom and affordability of a new home? Where employers struggling in this weak economy nonetheless find creative ways to keep their workers on? Could we envision a world where those whom we elect to govern do so with integrity and with an eye to serving the last, the least and the lost in our communities? Can we imagine a time and place where it would be unthinkable to end unemployment benefits for millions of people out of work while offering tax cuts to the very rich? Is there a future world where 14-year-old boys in Mexico are recruited as soccer players, rather than as assassins for drug cartels? A world where hunger and homelessness, hatred and hostility are vestiges of our shameful and abnormal past? Can we imagine living our lives now, as if these images are normal, as if what is good and true and right and loving truly matter? Do we have the courage to hope for this kind of normalcy and then to follow the lure of that hope into the next moment of our living … and the next?

God of the Future, you wait for us just around the next corner, beckoning us³ to a future so unlike the present that we can barely imagine that it could ever be real. Turn our sense of what is abnormal and impossible on end, O God of Stunning Surprises. Give us the hopeful courage to be the change we pray for in this world.

Those of you who are parents to young children may correct me if I am wrong in this, but it seems to me that little children have a wondrously natural bent toward hope. Their eager leaning into the future, their expectation that the next moment, the next day, will bring something delicious their way, are an inspiration for those of us who often choose to tell ourselves frightening or despairing stories about the future.⁴ What if we allowed a little child to lead us? What if we re-imagined our own stories, the stories of those we love, the stories of the wider world? Could we shape our vision of the future with trust and possibility, with expectancy and a child’s anticipation? Perhaps this is naïve on my part. Perhaps it is a place to begin to make a difference – in our own beings, in the lives that touch ours. Eventually, all lives touch ours.

[Sing, from the morning’s anthem/hymn:] “The wolf shall lie down with the lamb, the lamb. The wolf shall like down with the lamb.” And a little child shall lead them.

God of the Beckoning Future, we come to you with our stories of suffering and loss and worry. So that we might wrap these concerns in a hopeful future, we offer them to you, as we pray for: [the prayers of the people spoken here…] Gathering to ourselves all the hope we can muster, we spread the palm of our hand over the prayer list in our bulletin and ask your in-breaking hope-soaked

² Ibid. This is Brueggemann’s insight on closer reading of this passage.
³ Phrases borrowed from theologian Jurgen Moltmann, quoted in Hope in Pastoral Care and Counseling by Andrew D. Lester, p. 138.
⁴ Lester, op.cit., says that hope is tied to future stories.
presence with each of these good people. [Pause.] In silence we bring you our private prayers for others... and for ourselves. [Silence.]

God of Extravagant Blessings, we come to you with our prayers of thanksgiving for: [the prayers of thanksgiving from the congregation spoken here...] In silence we bring you our own quiet prayers of thanks. [Silence.]

We are bold to offer this and all our prayers in the name and spirit of Jesus, the child of Bethlehem we have committed ourselves to follow, who continues to teach us to pray together, saying, “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.