

are the kind of actions that maintain community when so much else seeks to break people apart. That kind of generosity comes from God. And that kind of holy generosity forms us into people who look something like those peaceful animals gathered together, like that child who lives with courage; like a community that honors, and does not fear, one another, no matter how different we are.

This week the social media algorithm showed me a post from the Alpena Fish and Wildlife Conservation Office. The picture was of a wet glob that looked something like a brain. The caption explained, “No, we didn't catch a brain in our net. This is a bryozoan colony caught in Thunder Bay...Bryozoans are tiny animals, no larger than four millimeters wide. They float alone for a time but eventually form colonies, working together for mutual benefit.” These small animals feed on algae and filter water. They could not exist on their own. Only by putting the needs of the group first and joining together, can they thrive.

Our human community is still waiting for a ruler on earth who judges with righteousness and decides with equity for the meek of the earth. All of us are still waiting to be overcome with the fullness of the knowledge of the Lord. Right now, we can only look to Jesus to see one who is both the type of ruler that Isaiah describes and a person who was truly filled with the knowledge of God. Jesus shows us the kind of peaceful world God is ushering us toward. But even now, God gives us glimpses of what it looks like to be filled with the knowledge of the Lord; of what it looks like when people live with generosity that builds peace in community from the students at Sunflowers to the microscopic organisms in our Great Lakes. I hope you will pay extra attention to the moments when God reveals those glimpses to you. Together, in this community that we value so much, I hope we will remember those moments, lean into them, and help to create even more of them.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



February 16, 2025

Sixth Sunday of Epiphany, Pledge Dedication Sunday

“Lions and Lambs, oh my!”

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Isaiah 11:1-9

The Boston Globe once described Sy Montgomery as “part Indiana Jones and part Emily Dickinson.”¹ Montgomery is a naturalist and a prolific author who has spent time with a myriad of creatures—from sharks swimming in the ocean to tarantulas that sat in the palm of her hand. Her writing seeks to connect people with the natural world, helping us not just to appreciate the animals around us, but to see them as our teachers. From an octopus, Montgomery learned to build common ground through a shared love of play. From a pig, she learned how to create community outside of blood relatives. From a weasel who tried to raid her chicken coop in the depths of winter, she learned respect and forgiveness. Montgomery knows that our era of life on this planet is a precarious one, even as it is also glorious because of all that we can see and learn. She writes, “We are on the cusp of either destroying this sweet, green Earth—or revolutionizing the way we understand the rest of animate creation. It’s an important time to be writing about the connections we share with our fellow creatures.”² Montgomery’s experiences open us to the bonds that are possible among God’s creatures. Her writing points to respect for the hierarchies of nature, but also to the surprising ways very different creatures can coexist peacefully when understanding and care guide the way.

The prophet Isaiah paints a picture of creatures living in this kind of community, marked by peace and generosity. The image is not just a wish for the future. It is the prophet’s declaration of what the world will look like when God’s anointed ruler is fully in charge. There will be a new world order. It will begin with the destruction of forces that do not bring about justice and righteousness. Then a positive reign will begin, one meant to restore a people and a nation who have been threatened and under siege. This ruler will obey only the Holy Spirit. This ruler will make decisions that are fair for people who are poor and people who suffer. Once that ruler is in power, all of creation will look different; we will all relate to one another differently. As commentator Casey Thornburgh Sigmon writes, “And once creation knows/remembers/receives the counsel of [God], there is unheard of security in the natural world, resulting in the humorous images Isaiah paints for us: babies handling snakes

1 <https://symontgomery.com/about-sy/>

2 <https://symontgomery.com/about-sy/>

3 Casey Thornburgh Sigmon, “Commentary on Isaiah 11:1-10, December 8, 2019,” *Working Preacher*, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/second-sunday-of-advent/commentary-on-isaiah-111-10-5>.

4 Sy Montgomery, *Becoming a Good Creature*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2020).

5 Qtd. in Elle Hunt, “I want community—but am I prepared to put the work in?” *The Guardian*, Feb 5, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/wellness/2025/feb/05/how-to-build-community>

and bears passing up a steak dinner. The hyperbole is hyperbole because such a scene is too impossible to implement by our human might alone.”³

Maybe the images *are* humorous!? A hungry wolf who lies down for a nap next to a lamb, instead of tearing it apart for its next meal. A small calf on its shaky legs choosing to hunker down next to a mighty roaring lion. Children who can play with dangerous animals without fear of being bitten. It sounds like a utopia, or like something out of a fantasy novel. But the scripture makes clear that, no matter our current reality, this kind of world is a coming reality with our God, not a figment of our imagination. And when God brings it to pass, “they will not hurt or destroy. The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord.”

When knowledge of the Lord rules our lives, then peaceful community takes hold, even among creatures that would seem to be enemies. When we understand God and God’s ways, we make different choices about how to live together. We honor one another. We care for each other. We don’t just put our own needs first, we look at what we need in the context of what everyone needs—human and animal, and even land, water and air. Creatures interact differently when the knowledge of God is what rules our hearts.

When Sy Montgomery was in the jungle in Africa studying wildlife, she hiked high into the mountains. All of a sudden, she saw a fellow researcher running toward her. She realized that a large gorilla was chasing him. The normal response would have been to join the escape, to run away from a dangerous creature. But Montgomery didn’t do that. She writes that she “crouched low and looked at the ground, as if bowing before a king. The gorilla stood, beat his chest, and let out a roar. And when he saw that I understood that he was boss, he turned and calmly led me to meet his gorilla family.”⁴ Because she demonstrated humility, because she honored the role of this creature in his own home, peace among them won out. Even a kind of hospitality was present. We do not yet live with full knowledge of the Lord. But we do get glimpses. We see, in part, what the world will be like when God’s anointed one rules. It will be filled with peace and care for one another, with humility, kindness and sense of shared community.

We got to hear from the teachers of our Sunflowers Christian Preschool today. The joy that their program brings to our building each day in the form of children’s voices and laughter is enormous. This year, an FPCRO family with a child at Sunflowers is affiliated with a family from France who is living in the U.S. for a few months. The French family is experiencing American culture, learning English, and reliving some memories from the parents’ own time as exchange students in Michigan some years ago. For the three months the French family is in the U.S., they have enrolled their daughter at Sunflowers. Everyone on our end had a little trepidation about the arrangement. The little girl doesn’t speak English. The Sunflowers teachers and students most

definitely don’t speak French. But we all decided to give it a go. Now in the middle of her stay, the little girl is thriving. She is learning and understanding lots of English. But importantly, the Sunflowers students are integrating her into their established classroom. The language barrier has not been a barrier for the children. Whether they have shared words or not, they play dress up and trucks, explore the sensory table and make believe. Though they are different, they are not at odds. They first saw each other as potential friends. And after just a short time, they *are* friends—all part of the little community of their classroom —learning, playing and growing together. Isaiah says that a little child will be the one leading all the other creatures in peaceful community. If only we would follow!

The kind of world that God’s anointed ruler will usher in embodies a peaceful community in the very best sense we can envision. Those animals lying down together—without competition, without enemies, without fear—mark a way of living that we aspire to. Charles Vogl has written about the art of community in his book of the same name. He says that a community is not defined by common interests or by people who live in a certain place. Community is ‘a group of people who share mutual concern for one another.’⁵ As an article in *The Guardian* says, “It’s the difference between someone you feel you could call on for help in the event of a 3am plumbing emergency, versus someone you technically ate pizza with once.” That mutual concern doesn’t just come out of thin air. Even spending lots of time together doesn’t necessarily result in care and kindness. Vogl says, “For [community] to really work...there has to be generosity.” Generosity: a willingness to share ourselves; a choice to share what we have; a way of life that is more focused on giving to others, than it is on our own security or needs. Generosity is what the Sunflowers children have mutually displayed to each other in welcoming a new and different friend among them.

Maybe being filled with knowledge of the Lord looks a lot like living a generous life, in the widest sense of that word. Maybe peace is a more likely outcome among people and groups who demonstrate generosity. I see that kind of generosity here, among you. Yes, in the ways you stretch and give to the church and its ministries, for which I couldn’t be more grateful. But not just that. Also in the ways you take care of people who come into your path—a struggling family member who needs a place to stay; the way you cook for and feed neighbors when there’s an illness or a death; most especially the way you treat each other and the way you treat us who serve here. You assume the best in each other and in us. You refrain from gossip. You want to help when there’s a need. You send us notes of gratitude when worship moves you. You encourage us and each other when life gets rough. That kind of everyday generosity feels small right now when the headlines are big and bad. But that kind of generosity is often where it counts the most. Those