

Sermon for December 8, 2019 by Rev. Andi Fox

Isaiah 11:1-10

As many of you have learned by now, I am a nerd. I am a nerd in a lot of ways, but this morning I'm especially a nerd for science fiction. Strict science fiction, sci fi/fantasy, whatever. I'm in. What makes strict science fiction different from strict fantasy is that sci fi is a projection of today's technology and society into the future, sometimes the very far-off future. The classic movie *Blade Runner* released in 1982 is set in the far off year of ... 2019. Oh, wait, I guess that's not so far off. But we don't have androids who can pass for human. We didn't have flying cars filling the sky in 2015 like *Back to the Future II* predicted. I'm hoping we don't have seeming error-proof artificial intelligence like portrayed in *2001: A Space Odyssey* or any number of other places. What fascinates me about science fiction is its ability to help us visualize a different future. One of the visualized futures I really respond to is that in the *Star Trek* series.

Many of you know the original *Star Trek* crew or the rebooted original *Star Trek* crew—Captain Kirk, Mr. Spock, Uhura, Scotty, Sulu. But in my childhood *Star Trek: The Next Generation* was the big thing. I adored the adventure stories and interpersonal drama. The idea of traveling through space to help people and learn new things was so exciting. It's still exciting. But I didn't really get the vision of the future that *Star Trek* presented until I was in my teens and caught a rerun of the first season's two-part finale. Three humans from the 20th century who were cryogenically frozen get unfrozen on the starship *Enterprise*. One is some kind of businessman who gets angry at being out of control and eventually interrupts Captain Jean-Luc Picard. Picard explains to him one of the main points of how the future operates in the 24th century: "A lot has changed in the past three hundred years. People are no longer obsessed with

the accumulation of things. We've eliminated hunger, want, [and] the need for possessions. We've grown out of our infancy.”

Eliminating hunger, want, and the need for possessions. What an idea! What a vision! What kind of leadership it must have took for such a thing to become real! As a teen I couldn't even begin to figure out how in only three or four hundred years the human race could come so far. But honestly, Star Trek's vision of the future is nothing compared to Isaiah's. “The wolf shall live with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the young goat.... The cow and the bear will graze... and the lion all eat straw like an ox.” Isaiah also points to wise and righteous leaders who set the tone and help create this grand vision.

Often these verses in Isaiah 11 are read as a prophecy about Jesus. At least, that is how they're read by Christians, but this is a passage from the Jewish Bible. The Jesse referred to in the first verse is the father of King David—the great king of the united Jewish tribes. When Isaiah was living, not only was that once united kingdom divided, the Assyrians were seriously threatening the northern kingdom. The lack-luster ruler of the northern kingdom was Ahaz who Isaiah was not particularly fond of.

These verses speak to an ideal future and an ideal type of leader. Perhaps it was meant to call out that not-so-ideal King Ahaz. Since Christians look to Jesus not just as a leader but as God-with-us it makes sense that we would read the passage in light of Jesus' life. However, we don't need to limit ourselves to just thinking about Jesus and his leadership. Nowhere in this passage does Isaiah mention a messiah or a king. David's father Jesse wasn't a king. David was originally a shepherd who took on a leadership role. Many of us take on leadership roles at different points in our lives. Organizing group projects, editing the youth group's Christmas

movie, budgeting for the household, running a business, leadership takes many forms.

Sometimes we may only be leading ourselves, but nonetheless we lead. And it's best if all leaders share a vision of where they're leading.

Isaiah lists out ideals of a leader—wisdom, understanding, planning, awe of God. And Isaiah gives us some examples of how an ideal leader will do things. An ideal leader isn't just wise--she understands and helps the needy. An ideal leader isn't just understanding—she needs to call out the violent. Interestingly, Isaiah points out what is on this leader's waist. It's righteousness and faithfulness. In Isaiah's time, and many historical times, leaders wore swords around the waist. Even in Star Trek they carry phasers. But this ideal leader will not have physical weaponry, she will hold righteousness and faithfulness. She will not use a sword to strike down her enemies. She will use the rod of her mouth. Or, as we might say, she will use her words. She will speak against the wicked and violent ways, and she will not continue the cycle of violence perpetrated by the structures of this world.

And the world changes. We get this incredible vision of a future. The wolf and lamb being roommates. The baby cow and baby lions eating together at the same table. No animal, human or otherwise, acts defensively or offensively. There is peace. This vision turns the script of nature around. A toddler will reach for something over a snake, and instead of the parent snatching the child's hand away in fear, the child will grasp that object without harm. On that day, Isaiah says, the root of Jesse will stand as a signal to everyone. That root of Jesse could perhaps be a leader from the line of Jesse or perhaps many leaders who are as faithful and as human as King David was.

This vision is enough to leave stars sparkling in your eyes especially when paired with the magic of Christmas. A perfect world where no one is hungry, no one is afraid, no one is abused. A perfect world where everyone is loved, everyone is cared for, and the earth flourishes. A world like in Star Trek where we can focus on things other than possessions. It sounds too good to be true.

And when reality comes crashing back down on us, those stars leave our eyes because we have no clue how to get from where we are to that beautiful vision of God's Kin-dom. Or even how to get to the secular vision of Star Trek creator Gene Roddenberry. How do we become leaders like Isaiah describes? How do we help transform our society into this grand vision?

There's no easy answer. Of course not, because there are rarely any easy answers to anything in life. A running joke in my world religions class is that the answer to every question is "it's complicated." Straight-forward answers are broad generalizations and need to have a big pinch of salt. We'd love a simple answer, right? We'd love an easy way to ensure those without homes are housed and those without food are fed. We'd love an easy way to see this kind of deep, meaningful peace that isn't just the absence of war. We're so far away from that. What's the opposite of stars in our eyes? Clouds over our heads, maybe? It's easier to envision three to four hundred years in the future when problems we struggle with are already solved than to look around and develop ways to solve those problems for ourselves.

No individual can get to Isaiah's vision alone. There is no advanced technology that will solve all of our problems for us. What we have is God and each other. I can't begin to imagine how some of the problems our world is facing can be helped let alone solved, but we have a solid vision of what a better world can look like. Together we are all better than we are individually.

Look at how many socks this congregation gathered for those without homes! 874 pairs! Wow! It may seem like a tiny drop in an ocean of problems, but there is nothing tiny about alleviating suffering in this world even for a single person.

We are the stumps and the roots of Jesse. If we want to see Isaiah's vision come true, we have to grow and bloom and lead others in this vision of a peaceful world. Others may see the same type of thing, and they may not call it the Kin-dom of God. They may recognize a future where the basics are taken care of for everyone as science fiction. They may recognize a vision of peace as science fiction even beyond what things like Star Trek is possible. What matters is having that vision and working toward it in every way and every day.

It's Advent. We are preparing for the coming of the Messiah. We are looking to share joy with others. We are reflecting on the year that has been and the year that will be. In the Advents that come my prayer is that we be able to say with Captain Picard that "a lot has changed" and may we be able to say with Isaiah "the root of Jesse stands as a signal to the peoples."

Let us pray for such a world.

Envisioning God, guide us in the pursuit of peace. Place righteousness and faithfulness around our waists. Light hope in our hearts to ensure that we can follow your vision even when things get difficult. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.