

“That Time When the World Came Together”

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December 7th, 2025

Isaiah 11:1-10.

Last week, I talked about how when God imagines life on Earth, God dreams big. Today's reading comes from the prophecy of Isaiah. In it, we get another reminder of God's extraordinary vision for life on Earth. Isaiah predicts that war is coming to Israel and Judea. The neighbouring empires will invade and scatter the Israelites. Jerusalem will be left empty, a place where animals will wander in the streets. The royal line of kings had started with Jesse's son, King David. That royal line will be disrupted by war, the royal family tree will be cut down.

But after this disaster, God will call the Israelites back for a new age of peace and prosperity.

The scattered peoples will be gathered from all their places of exile. They will return to rebuild Jerusalem. A king will be born, from the stump of the David's line. This new king will be the Messiah. He will set things right.

But, according to Isaiah's vision, God will do more than return the refugees to their homeland. Even the animals who have been at each other's throats will be at peace. The leopard will lie down with the goat. The wolf will live in peace with the lamb. The curse of death and predation will end. This peace will extend not just to the Jews, it will also extend to all peoples, and to the natural world. All of the world, all species, will finally be at peace.

It is a lofty vision, one that only God could imagine. It is a vision of peace that we humans have no power to fulfill. Only God could create peace among the species, to change the natural order. This is a clear example of God dreaming big. It is meant to inspire awe. It is meant to help us recognize that the desire for peace extends not just to warring nations but to the entire Earth. If this is to come about, it will have to be God's work. It is a humbling vision. A reminder that we are not in charge of creation, just one of its members.

In our day, this vision sounds so outlandish as to be both impossible and not worth thinking about. Our modern fossil-fuel lifestyle has been like a declaration of war on the natural world. Our governments seem unconcerned with climate change, planning new oil pipelines and ignoring climate goals. The world's species have every reason to consider us the lions which will destroy them all. We are little better to our own kind. Across the world, wars continue in Ukraine and in Sudan. A fragile ceasefire holds in a decimated Gaza. The American military kills people

in boats as though the war on drugs was a real war. We are a long way from finding peace for the nations, or peace for all species on Earth.

It wasn't supposed to be this way. Back in 1945, as the Second World War was ending, the nations of the world could see that something had to change. Too many people had died, too many countries had been decimated by war. And with the advent of nuclear weapons, it seemed possible that all species could be destroyed in the next war. A new path was needed.

Out of the ashes of that war rose a new hope for international co-operation, and an end to war. In 1945, 58 nations created a new world government, the United Nations. The U.N. was conceived to bring an end to war. The most powerful nations were to sit on a security council which would have the power to prevent wars, and to stop them with force, if necessary. The Soviet Union and the United States would have an opportunity to sit on the Council to discuss their differences and to prevent conflict. That was the idea, at least. And more broadly, the United Nations was meant to be a place where nations could work together to help insure the conditions for peace. Nations would be able to talk about issues like hunger and disease with the aim of making life better in all countries through co-operation. Through peace and prosperity, it was hoped wars would no longer be necessary.

But there were many obstacles. During the war, both sides had cultivated a deep hatred of each other. Each side had encouraged their people to see the others as animals, incapable of human compassion. In Canada, people of Japanese descent were seen as enemy agents, and were placed in internment camps. Those prejudices did not evaporate at the end of the war. Here in Canada, it was tough being Asian or German after the war. In schools, kids would taunt and bully children who had family ties to Germany or Japan. Racism carried the torch of hatred even after the war ended.

At the time, it was recognized that as long as people could treat each other with contempt, peace between nations was highly unlikely. The United Nations charter called for an international bill of human rights which would apply to all people on Earth, the first of its kind. A Division of Human Rights was created. Its first director was a Canadian, John Peters Humphrey.

John P. Humphrey

Humphrey was a 40 year old professor of international law at McGill University. As a child, he had lost an arm in an accident. He was orphaned when he was 11 years old.

Humphrey was sent to a boarding school where he was bullied. He vowed to dedicate his life to helping others who were oppressed.

Humphrey and Eleanor

The U.N. created an international commission to write the world's first international bill of human rights. The Commission was headed by Eleanor Roosevelt, the former American first lady, and a fierce champion for human rights. She asked Humphrey and his staff to write the first draft of the Declaration of Human Rights. Humphrey and his staff researched the history of human rights in all the nations of the world. His team and others (UNESCO) discovered that every religion and culture had ideas about human rights, many of which overlapped. Humphrey put them all together for the first time. A bill of rights for the world.

Humphrey wrote the first draft, but it was very long. Roosevelt's commission condensed it, making it less legalistic and more poetic. In 1947 and '48, the commission argued about which was more important: state rights or individual rights. Here's an editorial cartoon from the time:

Eleanor Editorial Cartoon

The caption is Eleanor Roosevelt lecturing the rest of the committee " Now children, all together: "The rights of the individual are above the rights of the state."

The horrors of the Nazi concentration camps convinced people all over the world that there had to be a way to defend individuals from their own governments. A universal bill of Human rights could do that. At first, the Declaration used religious language, referring to the Creator, but it was decided that this should be a document that peoples of all beliefs could ascribe to, so religious terms were taken out.

The Declaration of Human Rights was presented to the United Nations assembly for discussion in the fall of 1948. Ironically, even though a Canadian wrote the first draft, the government of Canada was not a fan. Officially, Canada worried that the Declaration would pose jurisdictional problems between the federal government and the provinces. It's hard to imagine a more Canadian objection.

However, Canada's real reservations lay elsewhere. The Canadian government worried that they would be criticized for the Japanese internment camps, which were an obvious violation of the human rights of Japanese Canadians. Even more problematic was the Indian Act and the residential schools system, both of which violated many human rights. As a result, when the declaration was given its first reading, the Canadian delegation abstained, joining such freedom loving nations as the Soviet Union, South Africa and Saudi Arabia.

In Canada, our view of human rights has always balanced the rights of the individual with the rights of the three founding nations in this country: the English, French and Indigenous peoples. We don't just care about individuals, we care about groups. However, as Michael Ignatieff has pointed out, for people who immigrate to Canada, those group rights are not so important. If someone moves here from the Caribbean or Pakistan, they will never become English or French. What they want is for Canada to respect their human rights, no matter where they come from. As Canada welcomes more and more immigrants, human rights have become more important, not less.

In the end, Canada did vote for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on December 10th, 1948. It was just too embarrassing to join the Soviet Union and South Africa in abstaining again. However, it has taken us a long time to fully appreciate the importance of human rights. Our country passed its own Human Rights Charter 34 years later, in 1982. But it came with an escape hatch, the notwithstanding clause.

Our provincial governments continue to opt out of our human rights to advance partisan concerns. Alberta has proposed it will invoke the notwithstanding clause to limit the rights of trans kids in schools. Ontario has used the clause several times: to send striking teachers back to work, and to change political campaign advertising laws - hardly issues of national security. Quebec uses the notwithstanding clause to prevent government workers from wearing religious symbols on the job. Muslim women cannot wear hijabs when they work as teachers or judges. Again, hardly an emergency that requires the suspension of their human rights.

We Canadians are a long way from the idea that human rights should apply in all places and to all peoples, at all times. We would do well to remember why the United Nations drew up the Declaration in the first place. In 1948, people hated each other, saw them as inferior, as subhuman. The lions wanted to devour the lambs. The notion that a citizen of an enemy nation had the same rights to housing, education and health care as oneself was hard to consider. The wisdom of the Human Rights Declaration was that it applies to everyone, especially the people we may hate and see as enemies. They are humans, too, just as we are.

Human rights are the road to peace. When governments ignore human rights, for the homeless, for suspected drug dealers at sea, civilization is corroded. Persecution of minorities becomes easy at home, and wars are easier to justify.

In the book of Isaiah, the scripture imagines a king of peace. He will bring peace to the animals, and also to the nations. He will look beyond appearances, and see deeply what people need and deserve. In Isaiah's words:

He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,

or decide by what he hears with his ears;

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but with righteousness he will judge the needy,

with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.

This messiah will rescue the scattered peoples, and raise a banner of peace for all nations to see. They will be inspired to join this reign of peace and justice. This is work God will do, we cannot do it all on our own.

But, we can be inspired by it. We can try to set aside our differences, and combine the wisdom of our religious and philosophical systems to declare what all human beings deserve. Human rights are that banner, a reminder that even when hatred reigns, love and respect is possible.

We can be reminded of the dignity of every human being even when they seem like lions and we are fearful lambs. Our faith promises that if we embrace love for the other, and deliver justice, our lives and all the world will flourish. Peace is possible on Earth, and it starts with respect for others.

The world waits for when God will inaugurate a reign of peace for all species. For now, let us follow God's lead to help our species to draw closer to peace in our time, for all peoples. Something to remember this Wednesday, December 10th, which will be the anniversary of the passage of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Amen.