

April 27, 2025
Rev. Jane Florence
The Spiritual Child
Isaiah 11: 6-9



This scripture we just heard is commonly called the Peaceable Kingdom. It has been notoriously imaged in art through the ages, but perhaps most familiar in this painting by Edward Hicks as this nation was forming her identity.

While no one can date who actually wrote this poetic verse found in Isaiah, or when exactly it was written, perhaps that is fitting. We can hear it as the universal voice expressing the deep - dare I say eternal human desire for justice and peace. It is not a dire prophetic warning that is the message prophets are most known for. "Thus sayeth the Lord, change or perish." This text is the boldest proclamation of HOPE and CONVICTION that the reign of God WILL bring a new sociopolitical order which will also mean the reign of God returns us to a peaceful order of creation. I have preached before on this text as the call to nonviolence; and on the call for honoring creation and all creatures; on the call for humanity's participation in this divine promise, and all that is woven within the text. However, today, I want us to focus on another aspect of the verses which is often slighted.

This was not the only painting Hicks created of the peaceable kingdom. He captured it many times. Perhaps this version brings our focus more towards the central figure in the prophetic text. While I love and long for the peaceable kingdom overall, today, I want to focus on who is it that is ushering in this new realm of godliness for humanity and all creation. From verse six we see "and the little child shall lead them." Commentaries slight this line and two other references: one to "the nursing child" and one to the "weaned child." This sociopolitical leader who will change the course of human history is depicted as "the little child, the nursing child, the weaned child."

Dr. Lisa Miller, "Yale graduate, consummate scientist, cutting-edge researcher, leading psychologist of her generation," wrote the New York times best-selling book, The Spiritual Child. In it, she explains the clear, scientific link between spirituality and health and shows that children who have a positive, active relationship to spirituality:



are 40% less likely to use and abuse substances
are 60% less likely to be depressed as teenagers
are 80% less likely to have dangerous or unprotected sex
have significantly more positive markers for thriving including an increased sense of meaning and purpose

I recommend her book to you for all of those reasons. I am not going into all of her methodology and findings, but I want to note particularly a basic concept found in her studies. Her scientific research supports the notion that Children are born spiritual beings. We are born spiritual beings. Our spirituality is an inborn human capacity. We are biologically hardwired and fluent in spiritual knowing from birth.

We spend our early years learning cognitive, linguistic and motor skills. We learn all about this world and our identity in it. While we are learning to talk and walk and read and kick a ball and stand in lines and behave in acceptable ways, there is an innate spiritual knowing that can also be nurtured and developed. If a child's innate spirituality is squashed, dismissed as unimportant, or replaced in priority with other achievements, it can fall dormant. It is never extinguished from our soul, but it lies dormant like the bulbs of winter waiting for warmth and light of spring to emerge to life once more.

Natural Spirituality is scientifically identified as the single most significant factor in children's health and their ability to thrive. Parents, grandparents, godparents, the entire village benefits from learning how to nurture the spiritual child. Dr Miller encourages speaking the awe and wonder of world to our children. She encourages us to talk about our own spiritual practices, awakenings, and struggles with the children and young people around us. She names including children in our spiritual conversations and encouraging their questions. Fostering a child's spirituality includes naming the values and priorities of your life and those your family shares and noticing the joy and struggle to live those values in daily encounters. She reminds us that our children are watching us and overhearing us. They hear what you say while driving in frustrating traffic, and what you say about others when they are not present. They see what you do- how you live. Whether you are their primary care giver, part of their field of love that gathers around a family table, or the grown up they see in church or a stranger a child sees at the grocery store, you nurture the spiritual child in all your encounters. We can't nurture natural spirituality in children if we have not recognized and committed to nurturing our own spiritual growth. In caring for the spiritual child of the next generation, we are nurturing our own inner child. So, do you see how we are the spiritual child too.

The little child who will usher in the peaceable kingdom is the innate spiritual child in all of us. The nursing child and the weaned child who transforms fears into playfulness with all of creation is the spiritual child within you.

In the weeks before Easter, I invited you to contemplate your heart's desire, to explore your faith beliefs, to expand your spiritual practices and to establish the Rhythms For Your Life. I've encouraged you to compose your Rule For Living- so you may live fully aware with deepest intent God's presence in and through you. For many of you, this process is naming, claiming and confirming what you have been doing spiritually and faithfully for many years. For ten of our youth, today, they are confirming vows their parent's took on their behalf when they were younger.

They have spent this year (and the years leading up to this year) engaging the rhythms for confirmation: - attending faith studies classes, serving others through our feeding ministries, praying and studying, and coming together in community. Today is not a completion of a curriculum or graduation from faith studies. Your journey isn't over today just like the rest of us who created our Rhythm for Life this Lent. It does not end today. We continue to live into the rhythms that will nurture our spiritual child. We will continue to reflect on our soul purpose.

We will continue to explore our prayer practices. We continue to study and come together for conversation, support and challenges. We continue to discern our Affirmation of Faith, naming how what we believe may change in light of milestones in our life, in light of new wisdom gained, in light of spiritual practices deepened through the years.

Our faith is not static because nothing that is living is static. so, Confirmands, you are taking another step today along your faith journey. Confirmation is claiming for yourself your desire to follow the way of Jesus love, compassion, service, prayers, witness, and connection.

Know that all of us - from the infants to the aged - are on that journey with you. Regardless of our age or the number of years on our path, we live, we grow, we continue to nurture our Spiritual Child within.

When we do, then as Isaiah announced, "the little child will lead, and the peaceable kingdom will be here, and the earth will be as full of the presence 'of the Lord' as the sea is full of water."

Amen.