

Of lions and tigers and bears, oh my!

If you take today's first reading *literally* (Isaiah's prophecy about a golden age to come) in which *the wolf shall be a guest of the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat; the calf and the young lion shall browse together . . . the cow and the bear shall graze . . . and the lion shall eat hay like the ox*, we might witness in *that golden age* the gradual *disappearance* of wolves, leopards, lions, bears, etc. Because if they lose their taste for lambs and goats and calves and cows and oxen . . . the meat they were made to eat . . . they would soon starve to death. Post Toasties wouldn't work; besides you can't get them anymore.

And what's more: sheep, goats, cows, oxen and all the other animals in a non-violent world would multiply like crazy, crowding down highways, sleeping on your front porch – not a very fragrant outcome. But that's if you take the reading *literally*. Actually it's ancient poetry.

And dwelling upon wolves and leopards and lions and the like, the animals we call predators, I wonder, if they were able to think and speak the way we do, why they wouldn't form a protest society about the bad name we give them – as violent, voracious animals. After all, they have to eat and when they do attack some victim it's without animosity; they're just having dinner; no harm meant. That's the way God made them.

And so what they would protest, if they could, aside from our shooting them on sight, would be the way *we make them* scary beasts, beings to be feared. Indeed we often do that by describing human beings as - for instance - the Detroit Lions or Chicago Bears or Carolina Panthers or Cincinnati Bengals or Jacksonville Jaguars – and over in the baseball world: the Detroit Tigers. With the whole emphasis being about how fearsome those teams are – how they are coached to chew others up and spit them out by the end of a game.

The effect of our exaggerating the fierceness of such animals – with emphasis on their teeth and tusks and claws – is evident in the reaction of Dorothy and the Tin Man and Scarecrow in the film *The Wizard of Oz*. As they approach a dark forest on their way to Oz they worry about “lions and tigers and bears, oh my” with ever more anxiety, repeating those words about six times at higher elevations of voice – until they meet a lion (Bert Lahr) who tries to live up to his reputation for being ferocious (*put 'em up, I'll fight you with one paw tied behind my back, I'll fight you standin on one foot . . .*) until Dorothy hits him in the nose. And he starts to cry! Not so fierce after all.

But if Isaiah's vision of the future is not to be taken literally, if the reference to wolves, leopards, lions and bears is really a metaphor of us human beings, relative to the ravenous, extremely violent ways in which *we* so often behave as evident for instance in the casualties of war down through history, then maybe Isaiah's vision is really about *human beings* becoming gentler, caring, sensitive, appreciative of other beings and of each other and the nature of the world around us – ready to be led by a child, a new human being fresh out of a manger, come to lead us into a world where *They shall not*

harm or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be filled with knowledge of the Lord, as water covers the sea.