

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
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Peaceable Kingdom: The Lion with the Lamb

The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. - *Isaiah 11:6*

And the lion shall lie down with the lamb ... but the lamb won't get much sleep.

Oops! Wrong sermon.

Let's try this – a true story, set in the oak-forested hills of Lorestan Province in Iran, as told by American author Barbara Kingsolver:

“... A [young couple], nomads of the Lori tribe in western Iran, [are] walking home from a morning's work in the wheat.... The husband [teases] his wife as she pulls her shawl across her face, laughing, and then, suddenly, they're stopped cold [at] the sign of a slender figure hurrying toward them: the teenage girl who was left in charge of the babies....

“[She is] the neighbor's daughter, who keeps an eye on all the little ones too small to walk to the field.... In tears, ... in frightened pieces of sentences, ... [she tells] them ... that he's disappeared.... Their boy had strong enough legs to wander off while her attention was turned to – what? Another crying child, a fascinating insect – a thousand things can turn the mind from this to that, and the world is lost in a heartbeat.... She has already looked everywhere, but he's gone....

“They refuse to believe her at first – no parent is ever ready for this – and with fully expectant hearts they open the door flap of their yurt and peer inside, scanning the dim red darkness of the rugs on the walls, the empty floor. They look in his usual hiding places, under a pillow, behind a box where the bowls are kept, every time expecting this game to end with a laugh. But no, he's gone. I can feel how their hearts slowly change as the sediments of this impossible loss precipitate out of ordinary air and turn their insides to stone....

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“[They search].... First their own village, ... turning the neighbors out in a party of panic and reassurances, but as they begin to scatter over the rocky outskirts, it grows dark, then cold, then hopeless. He is nowhere. He is somewhere unsurvivable....

“And some people sleep that night, but not the mother and father, the smallest boys, or the neighbor's daughter who lost him, and early before the next light they are out again. Someone is sent to the next village, and larger parties are organized to comb the stony hills. They venture closer to the caves and oak woods of the mountainside.

“Another nightfall, another day, and some begin to give up. But not the father or mother, because there is nowhere to go but this. We have all done this: we bang and bang on the door of hope, and don't anyone dare suggest there's nobody home.

“The mother weeps, and the father's mouth becomes a thin line as he finds several men willing to go all the way up into the mountains, into the caves, five kilometers away.

“‘In the name of heaven, the baby is only sixteen months old,’ the mother tells him. ‘He took his first steps in June, a few weeks before Midsummer Day. He can't have walked that far.’ Everybody knows this, but still, they go.

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“Their feet scrape the rocky soil; nobody speaks.... Nobody speaks.

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“[Six miles from home¹], at the mouth of the next cave they enter – the fourth or the hundredth, nobody will know this detail because forever after it will be the first and last – they hear a voice. Definitely it's a cry, a child.

“Cautiously, they look into the darkness, and ominously, they smell bear. But the boy is in there, crying, alive. They move into the half-light inside the cave, stand still and wait while the smell gets danker and the texture of the stone walls weaves its details more clearly into their vision. Then they see the animal, not a dark hollow in the cave wall as they first thought, but the dark, round shape of a thick-furred, quiescent she-bear lying against the wall. And then they see the child. The bear is curled around him, protecting him from these ... intruders in her cave.

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“I don't know what happened next.... I've searched for that part of the story, [to no avail].... I hope they ... quietly took ... up [the child,] ... praised Allah and this strange

¹ http://www.bearbiology.com/fileadmin/tpl/Downloads/IBN_Newsletters/IBN_August_2003.pdf

mother who had worked g*d's will, and swiftly left the cave. [I do know] this is not a mistake or a hoax; this happened. The baby was found with the bear in her den. He was alive, unscarred, and perfectly well after three days – and *well fed*, smelling of milk. The bear was nursing the child.

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“What does it mean?” Barbara Kingsolver asks. “How is it possible that a huge, hungry bear would take a pitifully small, delicate human child to her breast rather than [eat him]?.... You could read this story and declare [it] impossible, even though many witnesses have sworn it's true. Or you could read [it] and think of how warm lives are drawn to one another in cold places, think of the unconquerable force of a mother's love, the fact of the DNA code that we share in its great majority with other mammals. You could think ... that and say, 'Of course the bear nursed the baby. He was crying from hunger. She had milk....'”

Barbara Kingsolver concludes, “In a world whose wells of kindness seem everywhere to be running dry, a bear nursed a lost child.... G*d is frightful. G*d is great – you pick. I choose this: G*d is in the details, ... miracles ... tossed up as stars to guide us.... Some days, you have to work hard to save the bear. Some days, the bear will save you.... This story is one to believe in.”²

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I believe it. I believe it, not just because I even followed the links to credible sources, but because it both asks and answers some of the questions we most need to engage, now, the questions whose answers point to our survival:

How are we lost?

How will we be found?

How will we live in order to establish the peaceable kingdom?

The Jewish High Holy Days are upon us, reminding us of the power with which each of us is possessed, the power to heal a broken world. That healing begins right here, right now; it begins with each and every one of us.

How are we lost? We are lost when we when we forget that we are both child and she-bear; *lost* when we are deluded into thinking for even one moment that we are anything less than deeply, inextricably connected with every other living being; *lost* when we act in any way that dishonors the truth that we depend on them, and they are counting on us; *lost* when we forget that there really is no “us” and “them,” but only *we*. We are lost when we stray from a path with heart and wander far from the home of our

2 Barbara Kingsolver, *Small Wonder*, pp. 1-10

heart.

And we are found. By amazing grace, we are found. *Found* in attention to the details – g*d in the details. *Found* in 10,000 acts of generosity and hospitality and caring; *found* in the kindness to forgive and the courage to begin again, in love; *found* right here, right now. We are found in love and service, justice and peace.

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Beloved spiritual companions, “some days, you have to work hard to save the bear. Some days, the bear will save you.” In these Days of Awe, as we bless and are blessed by the animals, carry this story with you. Remember the details. In this broken world, may we attend to kinship and kindness, open our minds and hearts and hands, and rededicate ourselves to our place in the vision of the Peaceable Kingdom.