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Isaiah 11:6, English Standard Version.

⁶The wolf shall dwell with the lamb.

It's Time to Dwell with the Wolf.

Wolves are used many times in the Bible, both the Hebrew and the Greek, as a metaphor for spiritual and physical threats, for the destruction of human morals and human livelihoods. Whether the wolf is attacking with its teeth and claws or with its voice and its will, it is a symbol of greed and deception. The wolf will approach us *"in sheep's clothing"*, as the author of the Gospel of Matthew tells us, building a relationship with us, lulling us in, before attacking without mercy. We are under strong pressure in our society to be accepting and tolerant, and indeed, this is an important factor in attaining world peace, in people finally getting along with each other. We do have accept our differences. But we must draw the line when it comes to our own faith. We do need to build a firewall around that. We must accept that not everyone will share our values, yet we cannot in the name of open-mindedness abandon what we know is right. Society sends us many messages declaring that all people with strong Christian beliefs are evil. It's in

social media, in readers' comments at the end of New York Times articles, and in the plots of television shows. We need to recognize that sometimes these people are wolves in sheep's clothing, that they are repeatedly telling us stuff that will only do us harm if we listen and believe.

When our kids were little, I used to tease them a lot. I would sometimes tell them something that wasn't true, get them half believing it, and then let them know I was fooling them. I would say that we were going to buy a flying car, or we that were going to move the fifty-foot-tall tree in the front yard to the backyard. Kids are smart, though: they learn to doubt what I said. My teasing backfired on me. They began to not believe me when I told them things that really were true. Once, we took our kids out for ice cream. They had never had ice cream in a cone. I handed Martina's to her. She clutched it in her tiny hands. I told her that she could eat the ice cream, as well as the container it came in. She shook her head. I said, no, it's true. You can eat the cone. She shook her head and said that I wasn't going to fool her this time. Nobody is going to eat the cardboard container that holds the ice cream. She began to eat the ice cream. When she got down to the cone, I repeated that she could eat it. She handed the cone to me to throw away. She absolutely refused to try it. I had inadvertently

turned myself into the wolf in sheep's clothing, someone was supposed to be dad, but whose words were to be questioned.

The wolf plays an important role in other literary realms besides the Bible, specifically in the mythology of ancient Rome. According to Roman mythology, the city's twin founding brothers, Romulus and Remus, were abandoned on the banks of the Tiber River as infants. A female wolf came along and nursed them, saving their lives. The image of this miracle became the symbol of Rome. The wolf appeared on coins in the third century B.C. To this day, the wolf is on lampposts in Rome. And of course, Rome was seen as an evil predator to the ancient Jews and early Christians. The Roman wolf was a gruesome parasitic threat: it made sense to believers that the Empire used the wolf as its symbol.

¹⁵ "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves."

This is from the end of Matthew's sermon on the Mount, Chapter 7, verse 15.

These are the words of Jesus, who is warning the faithful, warning us, to beware of teachers who seem to have strong credentials, who are respected by society, but who are teaching false theology. The goal of this message, as well as that of the surrounding text, is to get people to think about the way they live. We must

resist the temptation to believe false prophets – wolves in sheep’s clothing – when they tell us that it’s okay to live in immoral ways.

Paul, in Chapter 20 of the Book of Acts, gives a speech in Ephesus, where he warns us that we might have wolves among us, that some of us might, during our lifetimes, turn into wolves, harming people who have come to trust us:

²⁹ I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.

There are many references to wolves in both the Old and New Testaments, but not all the references are negative. In Genesis, near the end of the book, Jacob is describing his youngest son, and therefore the entire tribe of Benjamin, as an almost vicious wolf, arguing that it will survive physical and spiritual attacks, that it will be physically and morally strong:

*²⁷ “Benjamin is a ravenous wolf,
in the morning devouring the prey
and at evening dividing the spoil.”*

If we consider the powerful symbolism of the wolf to ancient Jews and Christians, we can appreciate the beginning of Chapter 11 of Isaiah, where the prophet is predicting that a day will come when this threat is neutralized by God, when we will no longer live in fear of the wolf slyly tricking us or forcing us to abandon our ethics and morality:

- 11** *There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.*
- 2** *And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him,
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and might,
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.*
- 3** *And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide disputes by what his ears hear,*
- 4** *but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.*
- 5** *Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist,
and faithfulness the belt of his loins.*
- 6** *The wolf shall dwell with the lamb.*

Keep in mind that Isaiah spoke for God and often did so in oracles. These oracles were majestic declarations, where Isaiah was often trying to convince people to come back to God. The historical context surrounding this part of Isaiah, where our quote comes from, is that the Assyrians are expanding their empire and threatening Israel. Isaiah gives a series of oracles where he predicts that since the people are not living the way God wants them to live, God will use the Assyrian army to bring destruction to Jerusalem and the surrounding area. Isaiah is preparing the people for repentance. But with the stick comes a carrot: God will eventually destroy the enemies of Israel and a Messiah will come as a king to

bring in a new, blessed empire on Earth. That is the context of our quote: it details the promise that awaits those who remain loyal to God.

Isaiah is telling his people that a beautiful day will come, when the Messiah will arrive, bringing salvation for all. Violence will cease and peace will overwhelm all that is threatening. Let's look at the first verse of this passage. Isaiah is saying that the Messiah will come from the line of King David, and he's implying that this has great significance in the way that this Messiah will rule.

11 There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.

Jesse was the father of King David. Rather than making superficial decisions based on personal biases, like most humans do, the Messiah will rule wisely, with wisdom and understanding. The judgements of this new king will always be righteous, and he will champion the poor and those who are the lowest in society. Those who do evil will be struck down by the Messiah. Everyone will live with righteousness and faithfulness. Verse 6 tells us that the Messiah will bring forth an astounding world where the wolf will no longer seek to destroy the lamb, and in fact, *"the wolf shall dwell with the lamb"*. To the early Christians who studied the writings of the prophets, the wolf, the symbol of pure evil and of the nightmarish dominance of the colonial empire of Rome, will become gentle and

caring. Just imagine a future like that, Isaiah is telling the people of God. This makes a promise on two levels. Remember that to the people of Israel, they lived in hope of a kingdom of God on Earth, where a human ruler would come as a Messiah, a savior who would rule as a regular king. This oracle is a concrete prediction of a kingdom run by a wise and gracious ruler who will bring peace, safety, and prosperity to his people. That's who this messianic king is, a human – not God - in the line of David who will come one day and free the people of Israel and bring about a beautiful kingdom here on Earth. But Isaiah is promising more than just a human kingdom here. On a second level, Isaiah is telling us that when wolves can live peacefully alongside lambs, everything will be different for all of eternity. He is saying that day will come when evil will no longer be a threat to God's people – and yes, that includes us today. The destruction of evil, the taming of the biblical wolf, isn't just a promise of a peaceful kingdom they can live in here and now: it is a promise of a new, eternal world without evil.

And yes, it's true that Isaiah motivated his people by drawing on the fact that they were largely preoccupied with God blessing them here and now - with promises of God's salvation here on Earth. But Isaiah did indeed have another layer of understanding in mind. There is strong evidence in the Old Testament

that the people of God did believe in an afterlife; they just didn't believe in an afterlife with the confidence that Christians do. Consider this from Psalm 73:

²⁴ You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory. ²⁵ Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. ²⁶ My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

Chapter 11 of Isaiah is often seen as a prediction of the ministry of Jesus. And the balance of Isaiah's vision is shifted by the story of Jesus. It's not the blessed, peaceful world in the here and now that takes precedence. Jesus did not bring a kingdom on Earth. He didn't fulfill the first level of Isaiah's oracle. It seems that Isaiah's oracle was only half right: evil would be killed, but not on Earth - only in the afterlife. And it is true that in the Gospels, Jesus does not promise an earthly empire. When Jesus rode into Jerusalem, people yelled out "Hosana!" This Aramaic word, derived from a Hebrew phrase, "Hoshi'a na", means "save us now". It didn't happen - because that was not Jesus' primary purpose. The new kingdom he was introducing lives within us, and it will only exist as a physical kingdom at the end of time.

But we don't have to wait, locked up in our spiritual fortresses, battling the wolves in sheep clothing that keep creeping up at us. In fact, in a world that desperately needs to learn the message of Jesus, of peace and mutual respect, we

must not wait until the end of time to dwell with the wolf. We need to do that here and now. We need to be in society but also be wise and discerning. We should not be naïve when it comes to interpreting the intentions of those who speak loudly. We stick to our beliefs. We pray for peace, for kindness of thought and word and deed – and we remember that these are not values shared by our world today. Significantly, we refuse to retaliate – and retaliation is a way of life that is now considered by most people to be the right way. In your face anger, violent disrespect for people who disagree with you, has become the norm. We do not react defensively to hostility. We don't retreat and isolate ourselves. We step among the pack of wolves. But we do it with the wisdom of Jesus in our minds. We never forget his words: *“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.”* That means we listen, we hear, however we do not necessarily believe. We are hard to convince. We don't swing from one popular media-driven belief to the next. We are rooted in our faith, which is a permanent thing. We evolve our perspective of the world, while not letting our ethical stance evolve. We trust our shepherd to protect us. Still, we do have to know when to walk away. There are times when that must be done. Importantly, we know that we do our best work when we dwell with the wolf.

These are the words of Paul in Chapter 12 of his extremely influential letter to the believers in Rome:

Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. ¹⁷ Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." ²⁰ To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Eventually, I did get Martina to eat the ice cream cone. She was convinced that as soon as she sunk her teeth into it, I would burst out laughing. I had to end the standoff by taking her cone from her and eating a chunk of it myself. Only after I had swallowed down a good piece of her cone, did she go ahead and take a bite of it herself. As Christians, we should work to be trusting people. But a primary goal of every Christian is to help transform this world as much as possible into that world of total peace and kindness, of gentleness, where pride does not reign and humility is seen as one of the highest personal traits.

As Americans, we tend to be very jaded, even cynical. Seemingly, nothing can be done about political corruption, street crime, pervasive anger, war, and entire populations of people on the move, escaping oppressive regimes and human-caused poverty. Yes, it will end when the wolf comes to dwell with us for

all of eternity. The issue, however, is that God doesn't want us to wait for God to get the job done. We must do our share. We must work on this world. It is not a hopeless task. We will, with God's huge help, get the job done. Christians could have a massive impact on the mindset of modern humans. It is time for us to dwell with the wolf. People like to predict the precise moment of the End Times. It's time to predict the end of this world as a totally evil world.