

Our Hearts Transformed

[Isaiah 11:1-10](#)

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Hockey is very important in Canada. Canadians like to believe that hockey was invented here and perfected here, that no one is as good at hockey as we are, that no one loves hockey the way we do. And yet, it has been over thirty years since a Canadian hockey team won the Stanley Cup. In 1993, the Montreal Canadiens were the NHL Champions, but ever since then, every single team to win the cup have been American teams, teams from places like Miami, and Dallas, and Anaheim – warm places with palm trees and low income tax rates. And it just so happens that in 1993, right after Montreal won the Cup, the NHL hired a new commissioner to run the league, an American lawyer named Gary Bettman. So since Gary Bettman became commissioner, no Canadian team has ever won the Stanley Cup. Coincidence? Well, a lot of Canadians don't think so. They are convinced that Gary Bettman is evil – that he has spent the last thirty years conspiring to make hockey more popular in Florida by cheating Canadian teams out of a chance at a championship. There all these theories about inconsistent refereeing, and rigged draft results, and salary cap shenanigans, all arguing that the reason that Canadian teams keep losing is because Gary Bettman wants them to lose, it's not our fault, it's Bettman's fault. And I have to admit that when I was

younger, I found these theories somewhat persuasive. It really did feel like the world was rigged against us, when year after year all the Canadian teams keep failing over and over again. But now that I'm getting older, and hopefully wiser, I have to admit, I don't think we can blame Gary Bettman for the Canucks, and the Leafs, and the Oilers, and all the other Canadian teams being terrible at hockey. I don't think it's Gary Bettman's fault. He didn't force the Canucks to hire the staff we hired, or draft the players we drafted, or make the trades we made. All the teams in Canada have had countless chances to build a solid reliable organization that can compete for the Stanley Cup, and we haven't done it. That isn't Bettman's fault. That's our fault. And the longer we waste our time looking for someone else to blame – some grand conspiracy for why things are the way they are – instead of looking at why our teams are always so terrible – the longer it's going to be before things actually change. If we want to get better, we have to stop looking out there for a villain, and instead look at ourselves.

And that is the same lesson that the people of Judah needed to hear in Isaiah's time – not about hockey, but about their identity as God's people, their kingdom's place in the world around them. The people of Judah had always believed that they were special – that God considered them his treasured possession and had appointed them to be a holy nation, a kingdom of priests, his representatives to all the other nations. God's temple was in Jerusalem – the place

where heaven and earth met, where God's physical presence intersected with human reality, it was right there in their city, and they could point back to all the ways that God had blessed them and delivered them and revealed his power and love to the world around them. They could tell stories of Abraham and Moses and the great King David, all the leaders and heroes and prophets who had followed God and had their lives turned upside down and transformed. And they were convinced that this was still true, that they were special because God made them special, and yet when they looked around at the world, there was one big problem – they weren't winning anymore. They weren't wealthy. They weren't powerful. They weren't influential. The once mighty empire that David had founded so many centuries ago had been reduced by war and corruption and catastrophe to a tiny little backwater province, dominated by their neighbours, poor and irrelevant. They were supposed to be special, God's treasured possession, but if that was true, why did their enemies keep winning? Why did the Assyrians and Egyptians and Babylonians keep marching into their territory and helping themselves to what little wealth they had left? It had to be somebody's fault, some reason why things weren't as easy as they should be, why these predatory empires kept picking them apart piece by piece. Maybe they weren't making the right sacrifices, or holding the right festivals. Maybe they needed to sign a treaty with a powerful friend, someone who could protect them and defend them. Maybe the God they were

following just wasn't strong enough to get the job done anymore – he'd lost his touch, and they should look around to see if any up-and-coming young deities wanted to take a turn running the show. The people were tired of losing, tired of being bullied and ransacked by all these powerful predators all around them. They just needed to know whose fault it was, and who they should blame.

And the prophet Isaiah knew exactly whose fault it was that Judah was struggling. It wasn't the Assyrians or the Egyptians. It wasn't their sacrifices and festivals, it wasn't their lack of political alliances or theological convictions. The fault didn't lie out there. It was in here, in Judah, in Jerusalem. The people thought that they were the victims, and their enemies were the bullies, but they were acting in the exact same way towards the poor and oppressed in their own city; they complained about God not protecting them from ransackers, while they ransacked the vulnerable. They demanded God grant them justice against the Assyrian invaders, but they denied justice to the widows and orphans living on their streets. The people in Jerusalem thought that they were innocent prey being attacked by predators, but in reality they were predators, going after their own neighbours, fellow members of God's people. Yes, the people of Judah were still God's treasured possession, still meant to be a holy nation set apart from the world around them, but because they were living for themselves, acting just as selfish and cruel as the rest of the predatory nations around them, God had allowed Judah to

grow weaker and poorer, trying to get them to stop blaming others for their failures and to take responsibility to live the way they were meant to live, as God's representatives on earth, as people who displayed God's justice and love towards all their neighbours, to the poor and the oppressed and the outcasts. If Judah wants to get better, they have to stop looking out there for a villain, and instead look at themselves.

And God knows that his people aren't going to do this. God knows that they're going to keep trying to scheme and steal and use their own strength to get ahead, and so God gives Isaiah a vision of what is going to come. Out of the stump of the kingdom of Judah, the dead and rotting corpse of what was once a mighty tree, out of that stump God is going to bring new life, and a new beginning. God is going to send a new leader, a new king filled with God's spirit, and that spirit will fill the land of Judah, bringing righteousness and justice for the poor and the oppressed and judgment for the wicked. And when that new king comes, everything will be transformed. The people of Judah are all squabbling and arguing over who is to blame, who is the predator and who is the prey, but in the coming kingdom, God is going to abolish the categories of predator and prey, once and for all. The wolves and the leopards and the lions will no longer prey on the weak and vulnerable. The lambs and kids and calves will no longer live in fear. Instead of giving victory to one side over the other, making the prey into predators

and predators into prey, God is going to fundamentally transform the nature of human behaviour. God is going to enter in and change what it means to be human, so that we are no longer defined by our selfishness and cruelty, our desires or our fears, as predator and prey. God is going to remake, recreate the hearts of the people of Judah, so that they will be able to be who they were always meant to be, a signal to all the peoples of the earth, so that all nations will learn God's ways, all the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD. God's plan isn't just to put down the bad guys and lift up the good guys, God's plan isn't just to find someone to blame and hold them responsible. God's plan is to make everyone new – the villains and the victims, the predators and prey, and all those people who think they're victims when they're really villains, all those people who are both predators and prey, God is coming to make them fundamentally new.

And the way God did this, the moment this happened, was in Bethlehem. When God became a human being, God didn't just transform the world – he transformed us. Humanity itself became fundamentally different – our nature was changed, because God's nature became part of us, part of who we are. Our desire to control others and the world around us, our tendency to blame the world around us for the problems we've caused, those human traits are still with us, but in Jesus Christ we have been given God's nature – God's passion for justice and righteousness, God's wisdom and understanding, God's capacity to love, to serve,

to sacrifice, the peace of Christ that passes all understanding, all these traits become human traits because God became human – the Spirit of the Lord that rested on Jesus Christ can rest on all of us because Jesus Christ is one of us, the little child that leads us. Predators and prey though we still are, Christ leads us to become something new. From the old stump of our fear and selfishness and pride, God promises to grow new life, transformed life, resurrection life, so that humanity claimed by the love of Jesus Christ can live together in peace, defined not by our sin and brokenness but by the transforming love of God.

And we are invited to live in that new kind of life today. We are still God's treasured possession, people God considered so precious that he willingly entered into this world at Bethlehem and gave his life at Calvary so that we could be called children of God. And yet it is still so easy to see the world around us and the people in it through those old categories of predator and prey, as either enemies to be feared or victims to be exploited. So often when our relationships break down, we want to find someone else to blame, instead of honestly facing our responsibility for our words and our actions. If we want peace, in our families, our church, our city, our world, we need to acknowledge how we have contributed, actively and passively, towards the trouble and pain we see around us. We are called to bring our confession to God and trust that Jesus Christ is able to make us new, Jesus Christ is able to bring peace into our lives and transform old dying

relationships into something entirely new. God's desire for us is for us to have peace, true peace, for there to be nothing in this world that will hurt or destroy, for the earth to be filled with knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea, and because of Jesus Christ, that kind of world is open for us, that kind of life is available for us to live, here and now. Jesus Christ is bringing peace into this world. Today, may his peace enter our hearts and make us new, so that our lives will bear witness to the transformation that comes when the Spirit of the Lord brings us life. In the name of Jesus Christ – Amen.