

“The Peaceable Kingdom”

Scripture: Isaiah 11:6-9

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You may not have heard of the zookeeper who noticed one day that an orangutan was reading two books: the Bible and Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (Darwin’s book that proposed the theory of evolution). Understandably curious, the zookeeper asked the ape, “Why are you reading two such opposite books?” “Well,” said the orangutan, “I’m trying to figure out if I’m supposed to be my brother’s keeper or my keeper’s brother.”

Today’s text draws from our understanding of the natural world or of the animal kingdom. Our text is an ancient word about peace, over twenty-five hundred years old. Set within the expectation of a compassionate leader who will rule with justice and compassion is this vision of the peaceable kingdom...a kingdom that needs no leader but a child...a kingdom that needs no public safety officers, armies, or even a Department of Social Services. Yeah, that’s who would be involved if we heard of a family that was letting a toddler play with poisonous snakes. I will pick up the text with after the expectation of the leader to come:

Isaiah 11:6-9:

⁶The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.

⁷The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den.

⁹They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD.

How do we respond to such a text this? For some, it is vision of heaven, so it does not apply to us now. For other, I suppose, it sounds like a Mother Goose rhyme: “Hey diddle diddle, the cat in the fiddle; the cow jumped over the moon.” Lions lying down with lambs? Impossible! This morning I want to suggest that we read this text the way Edward Hicks read this text. Hicks was born four years into the American Revolution and lived to within almost ten years of the American Civil War, 1780 to 1849. You may not immediately recognize his name, but you will likely recognize his work. Edward Hicks is not known for being a preacher, or a writer, or a great military leader or a politician. He was a self-taught painter. Most of you have seen in one form or fashion his artistic depiction of the second half of our text: the peaceful living together -- wolf/lamb, leopard/kid, calf/lion, cow/bear, lion/ox, and child/serpent. In your bulletin this morning, if you have not already found out it, there is a copy of one of Hick’s paintings. Let me

emphasize that this is “one of them.” What you may not know is that Edward Hicks painted this scene over a 100 times in his lifetime. He kept coming back to this peaceable kingdom. So who was Edward Hicks?

He was a Quaker, a rather unique expression of the Christian faith. As a matter of faith, he regularly turned down requests to paint portraits. Portraits, according to the Quaker tradition, focus too much on the worth of the individual or the glory of the person. Portraits were commissioned by important people...wealthy people...powerful people. One of the strong tenets of Quakerism was that no one was to be lifted up higher than another. Hicks tried his hand at several trades, failing at most of them. He had the gifts of painter but he would not paint what people wanted most from a painter: a portrait. So, along with doing some other farm scenes and scenes of Noah’s Ark, he invested his energy and his life in painting this one particular scene over and over again.

Look at the insert.



You see the animals there: the predators—lion, leopard, and wolf. You see the powerful bear (the bear is hard to spot in this picture: he is cuddled next to the cow in the lower right hand

corner). In looking at several versions of Hick's paintings, I have yet to see a snake...only a child or children playing over the hole of snake's home (again, what is not evident in this reproduction is that the two children are playing over a snake hole).

The sermon today is not lecture in art history but rather an invitation to join in the struggle for peace. Hicks confronted the animal aspects that are twisted in us. He understood that there is lion dwelling in all of us, a crafty leopard lurking behind our grins; a wolfish cunning to track down what we want; a bear that will try monopolizing things for themselves.

Take that bearish aspect: monopolizing or grasping for what we want. As some of our youth can attest from a youth conference several years ago in Montreat, bears do monopolize things for themselves. A few years back, while the youth were attending the closing Friday night service of the conference, one of the adult advisors, Harry Emerson, went back to the house where everyone was staying. He made a churn of homemade ice cream and set it on the porch to await the youth. Harry sat down on the porch with his back to the ice cream churn. After a short while, to his shock and terror, he found that he was not alone on the porch. A big brown bear was pawing the ice cream churn behind him! A big brown bear that was blocking Harry's exit from the porch (the only other way off was over the rail and a 15-foot drop to the ground). What do you do when bear comes for your ice cream? You let him have it. Finally, the bear got the canister of ice cream out of the churn and dragged it down a couple steps off the porch. There at the foot of the steps, the bear gorged on the ice cream, sticking his snout into the canister of ice cream, holding it with his two paws. Big brown bears get all the ice cream they want! Oh...once the bear was at the foot of the steps, Harry slipped inside the house.

When Edward Hicks painted the Peaceable Kingdom, he captured in paint what our text is implying. God is calling us to confront the twisted animal nature that rules in us. Indeed, the peaceable Kingdom can only come from God. Wolves do not lie down with lambs. Cows and bears do not snuggle together. As beautiful as the natural world is, there has to be a reordering. Nature, particularly our nature, needs to be reshaped.

There is a classic scene in the movie *The African Queen* where a grubby sailor played by Humphrey Bogart is invited to high tea in an English missionary's home. This sailor is addressed very formally by his last name, "Mr. Ornack." As Mr. Ornack, dirty, sweat-stained, and likely smelly rather ripe, is holding his tea cup, his stomach begins gurgle and make noise. After several repetitions of this noise, Mr. Ornack shrugs his shoulders and says, "Can't help it...it is just natural." The spinster sister of the missionary, prim and proper, who has been trying to ignore these rude noises, says, "Nature, Mr. Ornack, is what we were on the put on this earth to overcome."

Although the spinster sister speaks in a rather stuffy way, what she says is right. Peace comes from a reordering, a refashioning—a transformation in what we call natural. We are to set aside lionish anger and wolfish violence and bearish grabbiness. That kind of peace can only come from God, the Creator, who seeks a new creation. Peace comes from God.

Peace comes from God but it is not static or even stable. Peace is a struggle rather than a place of rest. Edward Hicks kept painting the Peaceable Kingdom. For example, in some of the later paintings, the animals become more agitated. Some show the leopard and the lion with a growl and extended claws. Hicks, as a peace-loving Quaker, found that his own church was split by divisions and squabbles and hurts and factionalism. His beloved Quaker church was split...there was fighting over how to interpret Scripture...there were disagreements about lifestyles. He was heartsick over the division in the church. So, some of his later paintings show the animals in more aggressive stances...showing teeth and ready to pounce. Even the animals in the peaceable kingdom show signs of resuming their old ways.

Peace comes from God...peace is a struggle...and peace is possible. Peace is possible. Early on, Edward Hicks added the scene in the background on the left. See in the background across a ditch or ravine. What you can see there is a group of Indians talking to some Europeans. This is a great event in the work of Quakers in colonial America: William Penn, a Quaker, is making a treaty with the Indians in the area that would come to be known as "Penn's Woods" or Pennsylvania. You may recall that William Penn's treaty with the Indians was unique: it stressed mutual respect and the welfare of all parties, unlike so many of the treaties made with Indians, which were about how to grab as much land as possible. William Penn treated the Native Americans with a respect and mutuality that continues to be remarkable. Peace is possible...but as you will note, there is a ravine or ditch that separates even William Penn from "Peaceable Kingdom."

On the back of the insert is a poetic longing for peace...a prayer sung this morning by our Chancel Choir. Peace is possible when we our prayer is not just for what is mine. Lloyd Stone put into words the mutuality and respect that William Penn practiced:

This is my song, Oh God of all the nations,
A song of peace for lands afar and mine.
This is my home, the country where my heart is;
Here are my hopes, my dreams, my sacred shrine.
But other hearts in other lands are beating,
With hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.

My country's skies are bluer than the ocean,
And sunlight beams on cloverleaf and pine.
But other lands have sunlight too and clover,
And skies are everywhere as blue as mine.
Oh hear my song, oh God of all the nations,
A song of peace for their land and for mine.

- Lloyd Stone, 1934
- Tune: Finlandia by Jean Sibelius

In these days before Christmas, when we talk more about peace, we face a time of unrest, certainly on the international scene, nationally, and locally. Recently, I heard some pastors

talking about how in the days before Christmas the basic sense of anxiety rises. Tensions are higher. I am not sure I can identify all the sources of that tension. Perhaps it is the high expectations we put on holiday seasons. Perhaps it is the ghosts of Christmas pasts. Perhaps it is the “disconnect” between our words about peace and the lives we lead. Perhaps it is the gaps in our lives: people who were once a part of our lives are no longer a part. In any case, this is a time when we wonder, “Can there be peace?”

The old protest song from the Sixties said: “All we are saying is give peace a chance.” How do we give peace a chance? It begins as we open ourselves up to God. There is such a difference between the advent of Santa Claus and the Advent of Jesus. One is about rewards and compensation for being good. The other is about service. One is about extravagant things wrapped in beautiful paper. The other is about humility. One is about meeting your desires. The other is about giving you new desires. New desires that reshape the lion or leopard or wolf or bear or snake that is in us. Edward Hick kept painting the Peaceable Kingdom because our desires keep getting in the way of peace. Here is the good news: the peaceable kingdom comes as we live what we pray: Not my will but Thy will be done.

Peace begins with God and continues in the struggle. Recall that Jesus once said to his disciples, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” Jesus brought struggle. Then, of course, in those words of Jesus in the Upper Room, he said to his disciples, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you” (John 14:27). Here is the contradiction: peace is not rest but a struggle. Where is peace to be found? Peace is found in the struggle for love overcoming hate; joy facing despair; generosity confronting greed; letting go of self in the face of self-centeredness. Peace is a struggle. The animal in us says: Fight or flight! Fight: Get mad, rant and rave, take vengeance, get your pound of flesh. Flight: Hide in your house, in your work, in your book, in your playing, in your drug of choice. Run away. Edward Hick kept painting the Peaceable Kingdom because it is never a once and done proposition: the animal in us that only knows fight or flight. God intends more.

So take your insert home. Follow the Advent Practice sheet, or just put the picture up in a visible place. Read the poem again. And remind yourself: Peace comes from God...keeping asking for it. Peace is a struggle...keep at it. And peace is possible...even on this side of the ravine.