

## ADVENT IN ISAIAH: 2. PEACE

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Isaiah 11:1-10

Inside your bulletin, I have included an insert with a reproduction of a painting. The painting is by the artist Edward Hicks and is called The Peaceable Kingdom. I would like to take a few moments and talk about this artist and his work.

Edward Hicks was born in Pennsylvania in 1780, during the Revolutionary War. His family was wealthy, and Edward had been born in his grandfather's mansion in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. But Edward's father was a Loyalist and was left with no money after the British were defeated. Edward's mother died when he was just 18 months old, and his father could not afford to care for him. He was taken in by his mother's friend and raised in that family. Although Hicks' family had been Anglican, his new family were part of the Society of Friends--Quakers. His new mother brought him up with the Quaker beliefs.

When Hicks was 13, he took an apprenticeship as a coach maker and learned the craft of painting coaches. After seven years, when he was 20, he sat out on his own getting work as both a house painter and as a coach painter.

At this point in his life, Hicks was feeling lost. He began attending Quaker meetings as he had as a child. (A meeting is what they call their worship service.) Within three years, Hicks had joined the church, and shortly after that, he married a young Quaker woman. Nine years after joining the Quakers, he accepted the call to ministry and became a Quaker preacher. By all accounts, he was extremely popular.

Unfortunately, the preacher income didn't cover the needs of his growing family. So, on the side, he returned to painting. He specialized as a decorative painter painting household objects, farm equipment, and tavern signs. This type of painting was lucrative for Hicks, but it ran counter to Quaker beliefs on plainness. Hicks was criticized by some in the church for profiting off ostentatiousness. So, he gave up painting and tried farming. He was unsuccessful at that. He then tried non-decorative painting which paid some money but not as much as he had earned with ornamental painting.

With a fifth child on the way and nearing financial collapse, a close friend convinced Hicks to return to decorative painting. And he did.

Around 1820, when he was 40 years old, Hicks painted his first Peaceable Kingdom. Over time, he would produce 62 versions of this painting. We call them The Peaceable Kingdom because they portray the imagery which we find in the Old

Testament book of Isaiah which tells of wild animals living at peace with children and domesticated animals. *The 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.*

My sermon today is the second in a series of four that I call Advent in Isaiah. Each week, we will look at a different passage from the prophet Isaiah and how that passage can help us prepare for the coming of Christmas.

In Isaiah's day, his world was in turmoil. This was the 8th century BC and the once great nation of Israel led by King David had split into two kingdoms—Israel and Judah. Subsequently, the Kingdom of Israel had been defeated by the mighty Assyrian empire, and as a political entity, Israel no longer existed.

Decades later, the Assyrians are knocking at the doors of Judah and the situation looked bleak. In chapter 1, Isaiah identifies the plight of his people as being a result of their sin, of their turning away from God. Isaiah warns that Judah is facing a grim reality; it is going to burn and there is no one to save them.

But then, in chapter 2, the tone shifts and instead of describing the current reality, Isaiah offers a vision of a different reality, one in which all the people of the world hunger to know God. Furthermore, God's judgment is viewed as a gift and through it all nations set aside their weapons of war.

In today's passage, Isaiah once again offers us a vision. And, once again, he presents it as a contrast with reality. But this time, he describes a future reality. In the future, Assyria will indeed invade Judah and cause great destruction. But then, God will turn on Assyria and cut that nation down like the trees of a forest. In chapter 10, we read: *...the Lord of hosts will lop the boughs with terrifying power; the tallest trees will be cut down... He will hack down the thickets of the forest with an ax, and Lebanon with its majestic trees will fall.*

And that brings us to our reading for today. Out of a prophesy of death and destruction, Isaiah pivots to the promise of new life. Our reading begins telling us that *a shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse*. Although the forest has been felled, new life will emerge from what has been lost.

Jesse was the father of King David. David was the great king of Israel and the one loved by God. David's house had fallen. His lineage has been cut down like a tree. But Isaiah offers this vision of the reemergence of David's line, like a shoot growing out from the lifeless stump of David's legacy.

Isaiah prophesizes that this shoot will be a new leader for God's people. Exactly what sort of leader this person will be is not stated. He could be a king, or a prophet, or a Messiah, or something else. But it doesn't matter because this person will be special. They will be filled with God's spirit—a spirit of wisdom and

understanding. They shall know God and they shall fear God. This person will lead fairly and judge impartially. They will be strong, and they will be clothed with righteousness and faithfulness. This person shall bring a new era to God's people. Their leadership will re-write creation itself. The old rules of power and might will be replaced with justice and compassion and understanding. In this new reality, predators and prey will rest together—the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the goat, the calf and the lion. And they shall be led by a little child. This is the new reality. This is the promise of God's kingdom. Under the leadership of the one filled with God's spirit, all will dwell together in peace.

This leader—this shoot from the root of Jesse—will become a sign. He will be a banner to all the world calling everyone to God. And God's reign shall be *glorious*.

The season of Advent is a reminder to us that we continually need to prepare ourselves for the coming of God's reign. It is not just about getting ready for Christmas and the birth of a child. It is about internalizing the belief that our God is here with us, that God's kingdom is available to us. The question of Advent is this: How do we prepare ourselves to live in a new reality of God's peace? How do we accept that such world-changing peace is even possible?

I am not finished with the story of Edward Hicks. As I mentioned, he painted at least 62 versions of *The Peaceable Kingdom*. But these were not just copies of one another. Over time, his paintings evolved; they changed to reflect Hicks' world view. For the first ten years, Hicks' paintings were indeed truly peaceful. The animals are portrayed as being sweet and mild. The child has his arm gently and lovingly draped around the lion's neck. In the background, William Penn—also a Quaker—is signing a peace treaty with the Lenape Indians. Around the border of these early paintings, Hicks employed his sign painting skills to letter these words,

The wolf shall with the lambkin dwell in peace,  
His grim carnivorous nature then shall cease;  
The leopard with the harmless kid lay down,  
and not one savage beast be seen to frown;  
The lion and the calf shall forward move,  
A little child shall lead them in love.  
When MAN is moved and led by sov'reign grace,  
To seek that state of everlasting PEACE.

In time, Hicks' paintings change. The animals become increasingly tense. The child no longer embraces the lion but holds its mane as if to prevent it from attacking the calf. If Hicks included a tree in the background of a painting, he painted it split and broken. For Hicks, all of this represents the increased tension within the Quaker church. There was a growing conflict between those Quakers living a simple rural lifestyle and the more prosperous Quakers who resided in the city. Hicks was unsettled by the division among the Friends.

As Hicks turned 50, the animals in his Peaceable Kingdom took on a new ferocity. We can see the lion baring his teeth. Hicks begins to doubt if his church will ever reconcile with itself. In a sermon, he explained that each animal in his painting represents a different aspect of human nature as if there is something beastly within us.

In his 60s—his final decade—Hicks painted the last entries in his series. Peace appears to have been abandoned completely with some of the animals, particularly the leopards, openly fighting. Hicks wrote that he had all but lost hope that the rancor among the Friends would ever heal.

It is unknown if Edward Hicks ever found true peace in the closing years of his life. But I rather doubt it. And that is sad. It is sad that this man of God—a loved and respected preacher, a talented artist—suffered as his church fell into intrafaith dissension. But that, I believe, is a lesson of Advent. True peace is never easy. Salvation is never easy. Our faith cannot be reduced to bumper sticker messages or a pious-sounding post on Facebook. Faith is demanding. It requires our entire being. Faith is not one hour on Sunday plus a good deed thrown in during the week for extra credit. Faith is how we live. Jesus said this when he quoted the words of Deuteronomy: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.* Faith should be all-consuming.

The season of Advent is just four weeks set aside to remind us what we should be doing every day of the year—preparing ourselves for the coming of God’s peace.

There is another lesson of Advent that we find in this passage. That is this: We cannot do it ourselves. We can’t will the kingdom to come to us. We can’t fabricate peace. It requires the hand of the divine. It requires God’s help and intervention.

As Christians, we believe that the Prince of Peace has come as a little child to change our world. But somehow peace still seems elusive. Edward Hicks understood this tension between the already and the not-yet aspects of God’s kingdom.

But that doesn’t mean that we just sit back. No. The lesson of Advent is that if we want true peace, then, honestly, we’ve got to fight for it.

“Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!”