

And a Little Child Shall Lead Them

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This passage from Isaiah draws a delightful image of a time when all of creation is in harmony. How countless many hundreds of thousands throughout the ages have longed for such a realm! I believe along with millions that this realm, what some have called, The Kingdom of God is God's intent for Creation—that "they all be one"/that we all be one". This doesn't mean that we all look, act, think or even believe the same thing, but that we honor the Creator by honoring and recognizing the interconnectedness of all there is—the environment, humans, animals, birds of the air and fish of the water, all manner of creepy crawly things and flying insects, all intricately connected by our Creator.

Isaiah's vision of The Peaceable Kingdom is one of my favorite images. You may be familiar with Edward Hick's famous painting with that title. It is a painting of animals clustered around a small child. The animals seem to be smiling, childish in their depiction; it's what art historians call a primitive. In the background of the painting, there is a European man who is gathered with a group of Native Americans. He is offering a hand of peace. William Penn was a Quaker who was willing to stand up to the same religious and royal leaders as did our spiritual ancestors, the Pilgrims and the Puritans of New England. Penn's treaty with the Lenape tribe represents the Christian ideal of love and respect of others. Too bad that the same traits that led those early settlers to a new land would too often be overcome by fear and the need for more and more land, treaties be damned.

Edward Hicks, the artist, was a sign painter who became a Quaker and preacher after his conversion experience. He saw in Penn, a leader who could, in fact bring the Peaceable Kingdom into being. I didn't realize that Hicks painted at least one hundred versions of the Peaceable Kingdom and that there are sixty-two known paintings still in existence, most of them in museums but some in the hands of private collectors.

If one is prone to do so, as I am, entering the rabbit hole of wondering what the versions looked like, it is easy to lose sight of Hick's simple vision. Over the years there were subtle and not so subtle changes. The earliest show animals that are kind and even playful as they lie together, predator and prey. There is only one child—presumably Jesus. But as time went on, the teeth grew sharper

and the snarls more pronounced. The children became more numerous and the treaty scene receded far in the distance

Hicks was disillusioned by quarrels and factions within the Quaker community. He began to lose hope in humanity as he watched the barriers grow higher and stronger, the animosity grow deeper and more violent. In those later paintings, the child, the Christ, tightens his grip on the lion's mane and the bear's neck, holding them in place with his power, lest they be inclined to return to their previous predatory nature.

Although Hicks may have begun losing hope in the possibility of humankind working together to achieve peace, he never lost hope in Jesus, the Prince of Peace.

Isaiah speaks of death, the stump of a nation, of a dream cut off, destroyed, seemingly ended. But not truly ended. Out of that death comes a sprig of life. Out of that dream denied comes a new dream, a new hope. That's what Advent reminds us—not that a festive season and a small celebration is returning once more because the calendar pages have turned; but that hope out of despair is possible, that life out of death is real, that a dream of a way of living that honors God and neighbor both is not only possible but is within reach if we choose to bring it closer.

We have endured nearly three years struggling with enemies that are not visible. We are only just beginning to fully recognize of how much the pandemic has taken from us in addition to the agonizing loss of beloved family members, friends, neighbors. There have been well over six and one half million deaths worldwide with a million, one hundred thousand of them here in the United States. The loss of community has been painful. We were fortunate to have ZOOM to help us stay connected which helped but was really limited and it couldn't take the place of gathering in person. Remember the joy you felt when you were able to return to worship in this beloved space?

We had advance warning by prophets in the field of epidemiology but didn't pay as much attention. Like Isaiah, those modern prophets spoke to people who would not listen or see what might lay ahead with disastrous effects then and now. Microbiologists sounded the alarm about the possibility of viruses that originated and transmitted in animals could transmute into viruses capable of infecting humans. Swine Flu and Bird flu were examples of this already taking place. In the 1980's we first learned about the devastation caused by AIDS,

(acquired immunodeficiency syndrome). At first people largely ignored the warnings, mainly because it affected gay men and/or drug users. Some religious folk even claimed it was God's judgment against them, ignoring the fact that heterosexual men and women in Africa were also dying; that young children could be infected.

We can feel proud that two young UCC pastors who believed deeply in the gospel and our call to help the outcasts—began a program at Pakachoag Congregational Church in Auburn. The program provided health care, love and acceptance for the afflicted ones. Their work was the beginning of AIDS Project, Worcester, a non-profit that continues the life transforming work so necessary to thousands.

We were not too concerned about the other flu's because vaccines had been developed to mitigate the complications from flu. We forgot or didn't realize that an average of fifty thousand die from flu each year. The only time the numbers have dropped were the years when the health measures enacted for COVID kept people at home or masked.

When I arrived in China over twenty years ago I was surprised that everyone wore masks beginning in October. It didn't occurred to me that I should as well. Within weeks I was struck down with something that caused a fever so high I was delusional; my throat felt as if I had swallowed razor blades; the chills and body aches were endless,. We had been cautioned against going to a hospital by the Mennonite organization that sent us. Was it the flu or other virus? I'll never know but thanks to the kind care of my teaching partner, a few students and people from the church, I recovered.

Terrible as the pandemic has been and how the shape-shifting virus continues to afflict us, there is another more insidious and deadly virus that has been around since the beginning of time. Hate has devastated whole populations and destroyed civilizations. There is only one vaccine against it: the love of God that empowers us to love one another. It is the love incarnate come to live inside each day. Emmanuel—God with us, not only as a little child in a manger long ago but in our hearts today. It is the only way to live into the peaceable kingdom for which we long. When we establish it in our hearts, it begins to spread. Where the tentacles of hatred have tried to strangle love, the powerful beams of love's light cause hatred to wither and die.

Friday night was the Festival of Lights in Worcester, a time to ceremoniously light the City Christmas Tree in the oval behind City Hall. I have to tell you that though it was offered as a secular celebration, it felt very much like a religious experience; the joy was palpable; people from almost every demographic marker imaginable coming together for a ritual, sharing food from the food trucks. Seeing children taking their wobbly turn on the ice reminded me of another time when a little girl in her padded snow suit, wearing her older brother's hand-me-down skates, gingerly stepped on the ice in the town skating rink. The rink was the ice filled former foundation of a hotel that had burned years before. Cold didn't matter; kind older kids gave encouragement and helped her when she fell down. She didn't forget that sense of community and care. The almost famous singer belted out many favorite tunes, including "Rudolph, the Red Nosed Reindeer." It was fun to hear the crowd singing along lustily, including myself. After that rousing number she turned the volume down to sing what she said was one of her favorite Christmas songs. "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day."

1. I heard the bells on Christmas day
Their old familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet the words repeat
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

2. I thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along th'unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

3. And in despair I bowed my head:
"There is no peace on earth," I said,
"For hate is strong and mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good will to men."

4. Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead, nor doth he sleep;
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail,
With peace on earth, good will to men." ~ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

The little child born over two millennia ago still invites us to join him as he leads us on the journey to the Peaceable Kingdom.—it begins with one step. Amen.

Isaiah 11:1-10

The Peaceful Kingdom

A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.
His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

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.

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

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

They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.