

Sermon for December 7, 2025
"The Peaceable Kingdom"

Isaiah 11:1-10

The picture painted by Isaiah is a captivating one. A shoot from the stump of Jesse shall arise. This shoot has been traditionally understood to be the Messiah. That is why we are reading this passage from Isaiah in preparation for Christmas. Christians have seen this as one of the Old Testament prophecies that was fulfilled when Jesus came.

This shoot of Jesse, the messiah, will usher in an age of peace. This will not just be a peace between nations and between people. This will be a peace that spills over into the natural world. It will be a restoration of the tranquility and serenity of Eden itself.

Natural enemies like the wolf and the lamb and the lion and the calf will live with one another in peace. Even human children will not live in fear of snakes. All God's children and all God's creatures will live in perfect and eternal peace under the rule of the Son of God! That vision captures our imaginations.

The thoroughgoing peace envisioned by Isaiah captured Edward Hicks' imagination. Edward Hicks was an Early American painter and Isaiah inspired him to create a painting called "The Peaceable Kingdom." In the painting you can clearly see carnivores and herbivores, predator and prey, living at peace with one another. You can also see children playing amongst the wild animals. All that is in the foreground. If you look in the background you can also see over to one side a group of European Americans living at peace with the Native Americans. Hicks painted a number of different versions of this painting. Some believe this one to be depicting the treaty between William Penn and the Native Americans in the colony of Pennsylvania.

Hicks actually painted his 61 versions of this picture between 1820 and 1849. William Penn is supposed to have made his treaty with the Native Americans in the territory of Pennsylvania in 1682, around 150 years before Hicks. Hicks was a native of Pennsylvania and a Quaker. So we can understand his attraction to the event. It seemed to exemplify the ideal of people being at peace with one another.

But there is a tragic irony here and it was probably not lost on Hicks. Think what was happening in relations between Native Americans and the United States in the early 1800's when Hicks was painting. During the 1830's tens of thousands of Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Muscogee-Creek, and Seminole were forcibly relocated to what is now Oklahoma. These forced relocations are often referred to as the trail of tears. Thousands died. In the case of the Cherokee it is estimated that 4,000 of the 15,000 who were relocated died during the march.

How can we believe in the peaceable kingdom in a world like that? How could Hicks paint a peaceable kingdom in the age he lived in? How can we believe in a peaceable kingdom in a world where people kill each other over religion? How can we believe in a peaceable kingdom in a world where people are killed because of their ethnic background? How can we believe in a peaceable kingdom in a world where children cannot play in their own yards and where the elderly live in fear of crime?

Well, how could Isaiah believe in it in his day? Israel was facing destruction and their own trail of tears as they were carried off into captivity. Isaiah foresaw their return to Israel,

but still they would live in the shadow of the Egyptians and the Persians. How could he believe in an age of peace?

You have to go back to that shoot off the stump of Jesse. As Isaiah foresaw it a leader of Israel would arise. One who would lead in wisdom and righteousness and justice will bring this peaceable kingdom for which Isaiah and Hicks and we yearn. Christians have traditionally understood that shoot to be Jesus who came as God in the flesh. In Jesus, the Almighty came, in the flesh, to lead us in wisdom and righteousness.

That is what we celebrate at Christmas. We celebrate that God came in human form to live amongst us and to lead us into an age of peace and liberation and justice. In Jesus, God came as a homeless, helpless, refugee; the victim of an oppressive government. He came as light into the dark. He came to bring peace into the midst of spiritual, emotional, and political turmoil.

What did he do? He taught of a love that overcomes hate. He taught of faith that overcomes our ignorance and shines in the darkness. He taught of a God that loves all people, even our enemies, and therefore we should love and even pray for those who persecute us. He dared to say that even a Samaritan could be good.

And then he, the sinless Word of God, the fulfillment of the law come in the flesh, ate with sinners. He forgave thieves and adulterers. He gathered a community that included religious zealots and tax collectors. He taught them that peacemakers are blessed. Then, as he was dying, he prayed for the people who were crucifying him.

But this community, and the vision it embodied, did not die with Jesus' crucifixion. It continued after his resurrection and ascension. It broadened to include not just Jews, but Samaritans and Romans. It grew into the Greek world and around the globe. The church did not always live up to the vision of Isaiah's peaceable kingdom, but the ideals exemplified in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection have persisted.

Through the ages people have continued to be captivated by Isaiah's picture. People like Gandhi, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, and Bishop Desmond Tutu have tried to live it out. They have striven for peace and justice. The church today continues to try to live that ideal.

We may not see that peaceable kingdom on the scale that Isaiah and Hicks imagined, but we can see it on a smaller scale. We can see peace brought to lives that are in turmoil. We can see justice and mercy being shown to people in need. We can see love and hope shared between people. If we can remember this picture of universal peace, we can seek that peace on a smaller scale in the here and now.

The peaceable kingdom has not yet dawned on a universal scale, but there is hope. That hope came to us as a shoot off the stump of Jesse. That is why we celebrate Christmas. At Christmas the love and peace of God came in human form, and Jesus the Messiah can bring about the age of peace.

Jesus can bring peace to the human heart and peace to the world. The peaceable kingdom has not happened yet, but because Christ came, we know that it will come.

That is how we can believe in a peaceable kingdom is a world of violence and injustice and hatred. We can believe in the kingdom of peace because Jesus the Prince of Peace has come. Because the shoot off the stump of Jesse has arrived, we can believe that the rest of that prophesy will come true; inspired by that belief we can work for peace in this world of turmoil, with the vision of the Peaceable Kingdom to guide us.