

Second Sunday of Advent

Dec. 4, 2022

Isaiah 11:1-10

Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19

Romans 15:4-13

Matthew 3:1-12

From 1820 until his death in 1849, the Quaker preacher and American folk artist Edward Hicks painted the same scene over and over again: at least 62 times in all! Likely you have seen at least one of these paintings; if not, the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh has one on display. In each painting, little children stand solemn, un-menaced, and unafraid among lions, wolves, and bears, accompanied by equally unfazed sheep and cattle. Each face—human and animal—gazes calmly out of the canvas, meeting our eyes in serene invitation. To each painting, Hicks gave the same title: “The Peaceable Kingdom.” Hicks’ imagery comes from the first reading for this Second Sunday in Advent:

The wolf will live with the lamb,
 and the leopard will lie down with the young goat;
 the calf and the young lion will feed together,
 and a little child will lead them.
 The cow and the bear will graze.
 Their young will lie down together,
 and a lion will eat straw like an ox.
 A nursing child will play over the snake’s hole;
 toddlers will reach right over the serpent’s den. (Isa. 11:6-8, CEB)

Isaiah was writing in the mid-eighth century BCE: after the depredations of the Syro-Ephraimite War in Judah; after the fall of Israel and the deportation of its people (722 BCE). In the wake of these tragedies, the prophet describes his people as a tree chopped down to its roots. But still, there is life in the stump! “A shoot will grow up from the stump of Jesse; a branch will sprout from his roots” (Isa. 11:1, CEB). The prophet’s vision of Judah’s resuscitation is also a vision of the renewal of kingship. Jesse was the father of David, ancestor of Judah’s kings (see Ruth 4:17–22). This passage sets forth the prophet’s hope for just rule: his idealistic vision of what the king should be, and one day *would be*:

The Lord’s spirit will rest upon him,
 a spirit of wisdom and understanding,
 a spirit of planning and strength,
 a spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord.
 He will delight in fearing the Lord.
 He won’t judge by appearances,
 nor decide by hearsay.
 He will judge the needy with righteousness,
 and decide with equity for those who suffer in the land.
 He will strike the violent with the rod of his mouth;
 by the breath of his lips he will kill the wicked.
 Righteousness will be the belt around his hips,
 and faithfulness the belt around his waist. (Isa. 11:2–5, CEB)

That same idealistic vision of just rule motivates the poet in Psalm 72:

God, give your judgments to the king.
 Give your righteousness to the king's son.
 Let him judge your people with righteousness
 and your poor ones with justice.
 Let the mountains bring peace to the people;
 let the hills bring righteousness.
 Let the king bring justice to people who are poor;
 let him save the children of those who are needy,
 but let him crush oppressors!
 Let the king live as long as the sun,
 as long as the moon,
 generation to generation.
 Let him fall like rain upon fresh-cut grass,
 like showers that water the earth. (Ps. 72:1-6, CEB)

For the Psalmist as for Isaiah, just government in the social realm reflects divine order in the natural realm, and vice versa. So, the peaceable kingdom of Isa. 11:6–9 alludes to the priestly account of creation in Genesis 1:1–2:4a:

Then God said, “I now give to you all the plants on the earth that yield seeds and all the trees whose fruit produces its seeds within it. These will be your food. To all wildlife, to all the birds in the sky, and to everything crawling on the ground—to everything that breathes—I give all the green grasses for food.” And that’s what happened. (Gen. 1:29–30, CEB)

In this vision of the world as God would have it be, there are neither predators nor prey—nothing needs to die for something else to live. As Isaiah’s vision has it, “The cow and the bear will graze ... and a lion will eat straw like an ox.” Although his vision comes from a time of devastation and despair, for Isaiah despair at God’s punishment always yields to hope, for God’s judgment is always tempered by mercy.

Often, in the background of his peaceable kingdom paintings, Hicks depicted William Penn making a treaty with the Lenni Lenape Indians (look closely at the one in the Carnegie Museum, and you’ll find him)! The Quaker preacher knew that God’s peace and justice are not the property of any one nation or race, but are given to unite the whole world. Further, Hicks believed that Isaiah’s vision was more than a dream for someday. He saw the treaty with the Lenni Lenape in 1682 as evidence that God was already at work in the world, bringing God’s peace and justice to fruition here and now. Hicks heard that hope in the account of Isaiah’s vision: “On that day, the root of Jesse will stand as a signal to the peoples. The nations will seek him out, and his dwelling will be glorious” (Isa. 11:10, CEB).

Paul heard it, too! For this apostle to the Gentiles, Isaiah’s vision demonstrated that God’s grace extends beyond the borders of Israel. In Romans 15:12, Paul quotes that same verse (it sounds a bit different, as Paul is quoting from the Septuagint: the Greek translation of Jewish Scripture). For Paul, of course, the branch from the root of Jesse is Jesus, who has fulfilled Isaiah’s dreams of what a king should be, and who comes, as Isaiah envisioned, to all peoples.

New Testament scholar Robert Jewett proposes that Paul wrote Romans as an ambassador for Christ, seeking to reconcile the estranged gentile (non-Jewish) and Jewish

Christian communities in Rome. So, Paul begins that letter by asserting his confidence that Jesus has come to and for Jew and gentile alike: “I’m not ashamed of the gospel: it is God’s own power for salvation to all who have faith in God, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Rom. 1:16, CEB). He returns to this theme toward the end of Romans:

So welcome each other, in the same way that Christ also welcomed you, for God’s glory. I’m saying that Christ became a servant of those who are circumcised for the sake of God’s truth, in order to confirm the promises given to the ancestors, and so that the Gentiles could glorify God for his mercy. (Rom. 15:7-9, CEB)

Paul is persuaded that the Gospel is for *everyone*! His benediction, to the Roman Christians and to us, is:

May the God of endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude toward each other, similar to Christ Jesus’ attitude. That way you can glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ together with one voice. (Rom. 15:5-6)

The NRSV reads, “May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus.”

In this second week of Advent, our attention is drawn to John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Christ. John famously baptized all comers, *any* who repented of their sins. He reminded the religious leaders, so proud of their distinct heritage, that God could raise children of Abraham from the stones (Matt. 3:9)! The gospel is not the property of any nation, or race, or group, but is given to the whole world.

Jurgen Moltmann, whose famous theology of hope had its beginnings when he was a German POW in England, warns Christians not to be seduced by nationalism:

The church of Christ is present in all the people on earth and cannot become ‘a national religion’. The church of Christ ecumenically embraces the whole inhabited earth. She is not a tribal religion, nor a Western religion, nor a white religion, but the church of all humanity. The church of Christ is not national, but it is a church of all the nations and humanity.

Moltmann’s warning comes from grim experience: he saw first-hand in Nazi Germany the destructive consequences of the church allied with a state defined by exclusion.

I cannot remember a time in my life when we more needed to hear this word! True, the divisions that tear at our community today are not the same as those that Isaiah, or John, or Paul addressed, but the point remains. In the Peaceable Kingdom that Isaiah saw, John and Paul preached, and Hicks painted, predators and prey—natural enemies!—sit peacefully together: and so must we.

- What could the Peaceable Kingdom look like today in your personal life? In your community? In your nation? In the world?
- How does the practice of welcome and hospitality contribute to the Peaceable Kingdom? To whom do you struggle to show hospitality?

- Think of one attitude you currently possess which you'd like to change in this season of Advent. Share this desire to change attitude with another person, and ask them to hold you accountable to working on that change.
- Where do you see the gospel being "claimed" as the exclusive property of one group? Where do you see the gospel being described as a gift to the whole world?