

## **Visions of Peace: The Peaceable Kingdom**

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers  
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,  
on Sunday, December 4, 2022.

Isaiah 11:1-10  
Romans 15:4-13

Advent is a season of waiting, of hope, of expectation. It is a season of waiting for the coming of the Christ Child. It is a season of hope for the peace that Christ will bring. It is a season of expectation that the world will one day be transformed.

And so on this second Sunday of Advent, the lectionary lifts up Isaiah's vision of the peaceable kingdom, in which natural-born enemies will live together in peace, led by a little child: "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."

Isaiah's vision wasn't the product of a utopian imagination. Isaiah was no Pollyanna. On the contrary, Isaiah's vision was born out of his own real world experience with violence and war.

Isaiah was a prophet in the southern kingdom of Judah. He was a Jerusalem insider. He had access to the halls of power. During his fifty-year career, he had the ear of four Judean kings. Yet, for most of his life, he stood in opposition to their policies and rebuked them in the sharpest terms.

Around the year 735 B.C., the northern kingdom of Israel and its neighbor, Syria, were feeling pressure from the Assyrian empire to their east. Assyria was the most feared nation in the region. It was the dominant military power in the Near East, and was described by Isaiah as a roaring lion that seizes her prey.

Israel and Syria wanted the southern kingdom of Judah, governed by King Ahaz, to join them in an alliance against the Assyrian empire, but Judah refused, preferring to remain independent. Israel and Syria, however, were unwilling to have a neutral and potentially hostile power to their rear, so they invaded Judah and advanced on Jerusalem with the intention of deposing King Ahaz and installing their own puppet regime. King Ahaz, his throne endangered, and helpless to defend himself, felt he had no choice but to appeal to the Assyrian King for assistance. The prophet Isaiah advised King Ahaz against this course of action, but Ahaz disregarded Isaiah's counsel and formed an alliance with Assyria, effectively signing away Judah's independence. Assyria attacked Israel and Syria, deporting portions of their population, and destroying many of their cities. Ahaz and his kingdom, Judah, were spared the same fate, but Judah became a vassal state of the Assyrian empire. Consequently, morale among the Judean people declined, and King Ahaz's approval ratings plummeted.

This was the context in which Isaiah spoke of a new king, presumably to replace King Ahaz, a new king who would come from King David's family line: "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, (Jesse was David's father) and a branch shall grow out of his roots." Isaiah had a vision of a new king with God-given gifts for leadership: intellectual power, moral might, and deep religious faith. "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." This king would rule with justice and righteousness, and would establish a new era of peace and harmony.

This is where Isaiah's popular image of the peaceable kingdom comes in. It is an idyllic vision, one that is ingrained in our memories not only by Isaiah's words but also by the paintings of the nineteenth-century American artist, Edward Hicks. On screen is Hicks' painting entitled *The Peaceable Kingdom*. It depicts a large friendly ox and a large lion, together with a wolf, a lamb, a leopard, a goat, a cow, and other animals, all lying down with one another, while children play around them. The colors of the painting are deep shades of green and brown, rich earth tones portraying a fertile landscape. The painting has an air of calmness and peace, and an almost otherworldly atmosphere. Hicks was a Quaker, and he was fascinated with Isaiah's

vision. Over the course of his career he painted more than 60 different versions of this scene.

But in addition to the biblical imagery of animals and little children living together in harmony, Hicks includes a more contemporary image in these paintings. In the background off to the left side he includes a gathering of Native Americans and European settlers signing a peace accord. For Hicks, Isaiah's vision of the peaceable kingdom was something to be lived in the here and now. It was a vision that was meant to govern contemporary social and political relationships.

Some Old Testament scholars believe that Isaiah was speaking metaphorically about international peace. Remember my saying that earlier in the book of Isaiah, the Assyrian empire is described as a roaring lion that seizes her prey? Isaiah may have been extending this metaphor to say that the lions of the international arena would no longer attack the lambs – great empires would no longer prey on small nations, but they would live in peace and harmony. In a warring world, Isaiah was holding out hope for a day when there would be peace and reconciliation among nations. He was holding out hope for a new king who would establish a just and peaceful world order.

In the Christian tradition, this and similar passages in Isaiah have been interpreted as pointing to the birth of Jesus, the Christ. But that was not what Isaiah understood himself to be doing. He was not predicting the birth of the Messiah in some distant future. Rather, Isaiah had in mind a king who would live and reign in the immediate future, in Isaiah's own time.

It was only later, in the first century of the Common Era, when Jesus' followers began to search the Hebrew scriptures in an attempt to understand Jesus' profound significance for the world, that passages from Isaiah began to be lifted up as pointing to the birth of Jesus. Paul does this in his letter to the Romans: "The root of Jesse shall come," he writes, "the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope." We find this reappropriation of scripture in the gospels as well, especially in Matthew. So, passages that had one meaning in the eighth century B.C., were given new meaning in the first century as they were used in telling the story of Jesus and his significance for the world. The new meaning does not cancel out the old. It simply

adds an overlay of meaning to the original. It is a matter of both/and rather than either/or.

Turning to the letter to the Romans, we find Isaiah's message of hope and peace taken up by the apostle Paul: "whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction," Paul says, "so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope." And what does Paul say the scriptures instruct and encourage us to do? "Live in harmony with one another." "Welcome one another." And, in so doing, "glorify God."

Paul takes Isaiah's vision of the peaceable kingdom and breaks it down for us. He makes it plain and relates it to our own lives. In our interpersonal relationships, at home, at work, here at church, in the community, we should "welcome one another," "live in harmony with one another," and, in so doing, "glorify God." And Paul's not referring only to our friends. He's talking about our enemies as well. That's Isaiah's vision, after all, that natural-born enemies will find ways of living with each other instead of killing each other.

Are you a wolf? Then don't devour the lambs in your life. Are you a leopard? Then take it easy on the kids. Are you a calf? Have the courage to stand your ground when lions approach. Are you a cow? Share a meal with a bear in your life. Are you a lion? Break bread together with an ox. Are you a snake? Stop preying on the innocent.

Of course, the thing is we have trouble loving our enemies on our own. We find it difficult to change the way we interact with others. Old habits and patterns die hard. So, we look to the one who first came to us as a little child to lead us.

Our Advent hope is in a newborn king, the baby Jesus, the Christ Child, the Messiah, the little child who comes to lead us with justice and righteousness, the one who comes to bring peace on earth and good will to all people. It is because of Jesus that we dare to hope for a world at peace. May it be so. Amen.