

The Peaceable Kingdom

Christmas Eve: Candles, Carols and Communion

Text: Isaiah 11: 1-10; Luke 2: 1-14

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On the other side of Avon Mountain . . . tucked in along Terry Plains Road is a barnyard bearing the name of The Peaceable Kingdom. Actually, there are two such farms along that stretch of road but a few miles apart, each claiming the same name.

There are only a few animals at either one of them – all told maybe a dozen or so. Some chickens and a goat. A few sheep. One of them has a mini-shepherd pony that looks something like a unicorn, and also an odd bird resembling an ostrich. They are very peaceful places. Nothing quite so alarming as lions or lambs together, or wolves and calves along side one another.

It's an archetypal vision with profound tenderness to it. One that reminds me of what could really be. And every time that Pam and I drive over that way she breathes a hopeful sigh that I love to hear: "Ah, the peaceable kingdom!"

It's prompts the realm of God as Isaiah does: "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."

Somewhere back in the day . . . a Quaker artist by the name of Edward Hicks was so compelled by that scene that painted it over and over – actually creating 100 versions during his lifetime, the most famous one being in 1833. Aligned with his Quaker beliefs and fitting in his home state of Pennsylvania, some of those paintings "incorporated a vignette of William Penn's treaty with the Native Americans of his day"¹ into the biblical vision from Isaiah.

These paintings provided his means of support as a Quaker preacher and teacher in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. To study his gallery, the careful eye will notice his struggle with the dissonance between the idealized and the real world. Canvas by canvas it comes clear that the nascent belief of his earlier years was wearing down. Over time his perspective was becoming more dismayed, discouraged and disappointed. The predators in his painting gradually became more ferocious; and the vulnerable animals looked more frightened. Painting by painting, the miracle seemed harder to sustain.

By the end of his life he confessed, "It was just so difficult to get it right; so hard to trust myself to a vision when so many adversaries" . . . eclipse the better angels of human possibility.²

I rather suspect we all understand . . . that tension. It's the distance, sometimes seeming impossible to bridge, between the realm of God and the stark realities of the world in which we live. It's the dissonance between the "already world" in which we live

and the “not yet world” of God’s deep dream – which is one of the challenges of biblical faith.

We don’t have to look very far at all over the edges these uncertain these days. Aleppo and the growing refugee crisis are so heart-breaking; a terrorist attack on a Christmas street in Berlin; shadows of cold-war days visit back in the guise of cyber-attacks with old foes; there is increasing tension and little rest in the middle east; and even in our land of peace all us not very well-settled.

This is where and when we need to do as Hicks did, and be intentional holders and makers of shalom, even when the times seem to negate that; and we need to look to the values of God as in the Peaceable Kingdom.

That vision has lasted for thousands of years for the very reason that the truth that lies beneath cannot be denied. And our part is to hold it up; to lift our own candle in whatever manner of darkness is around; to say no to that which needs no, and yes to that which needs yes.

For this is the truth of the Gospel. If the love of Christ is anywhere alive, it begins in the human heart – yours, mine and ours. If the peace of Christ is anywhere real, it starts with the thoughts and actions by which we live. If the hope of Christ is anywhere present, it roots in the human soul and grows to the garden of the world. And if the light of Christ is anywhere seen, it’s because people of all sorts and variety work hard to spread faith and hope and love and justice and joy with extravagance.

Because The Peaceable Kingdom, the vision of God, the hope of the Bethlehem is so much more than a dream:

Blessed are you
who bear the light
in unbearable times,
who testify
to its endurance
amid the unendurable,
who bear witness
to its persistence
when everything seems
in shadow
and fear.

Blessed are you
in whom the light lives,
in whom the brightness blazes—
your heart a chapel,
an altar where in the deepest night
can be seen the fire that
shines forth in you

in unaccountable faith
in stubborn hope
in love that illumines
every broken thing it finds.³

My family and my friends, blessed are you this sacred night as we come to the Table of Peace. Amen.

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¹ Edward Hicks: Wikipedia.

² Paul D. Duke in "The Lion and the Lamb" an unpublished sermon. Full source unknown. See also: "Living the Word" in Christian Century, February 13, 2013, p. 20.

³ Jan Richardson. Circle of Grace. Wanton Gospeller Press, 2015, pp. 47-48.