

THE PEACEABLE KINGDOM

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The wolf shall live with the lamb ... the weaned child shall put its hand in the adder's den. They will not hurt nor 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 11)

It was that kind of a crazy afternoon. I was young – perhaps 7 or 8 – and my mother had walked my two brothers and me to the town center for some shopping, as she often did on Saturdays. Along the way we usually enjoyed stopping into the local pet store to see the puppies and kittens and the tropical fish in their rows and rows of tanks. This day, in one large aquarium that was perfectly at eye level for a child, dozens of little turtles swam every which-way in the water. Each one had a shell about the size of a half-dollar coin. They would paddle about with their stubby little arms and legs, dive deep, come back up for air, and playfully chase each other. My brothers and I stood mesmerized by the happy, chaotic scene.

Just then a store clerk, who must have noticed our interest in the turtles, asked if we'd like to watch them eat. Well, of course we would. At home we always enjoyed watching the goldfish we'd won at school fairs eat those smelly flakes we would sprinkle into their bowl. I suppose we assumed turtles had a similar diet. Oh my, no. The clerk came back with a plastic bag full of water, and in the water were live goldfish, more than we could count. Into the turtle tank went the goldfish, and the ensuing mayhem was something I remember to this day. All those cute turtles with their stubby little arms and legs began chasing after all those goldfish – not to play with them, but to eat them. It was a merciless slaughter. Fin by fin, bite by bite, gill by gill the turtles immobilized the fish and devoured them. I can recall one half-eaten fish swimming sideways and upside down making its way to the glass where we watched, as if to say to us with its dying gasps, "It stinks to be me." What had been a happy, playful scene turned into my first encounter with the violence of nature, red in tooth and claw.

In today's Old Testament reading, the prophet Isaiah (11:1-10) describes a scene with all the potential for carnage that I witnessed in the pet store aquarium long ago. Imagine a lamb wandering into a pack of wolves, and a small child reaching into a den of venomous snakes. Picture a goat trying to snuggle up to a leopard, or a cow saying to a bear and a lion, "don't eat me; try some straw instead." What will happen to a calf that lays down for a nap at the feet of a lion, or a little child who tries to engage a bear in play? Who wants to watch the scenes play out to their inevitable conclusion, or worse yet, be in them? Yes, from our vantage point at the top of the food chain, we've grown accustomed to the fact that life feeds upon life. Even still, some part of us recoils from the violence.

Nevertheless, Isaiah's vision paints a different picture – a scene that the 19th century American folk artist Edward Hicks tried to capture on canvass in his great paintings entitled *The Peaceable Kingdom*. In Isaiah's prophecy and on Hicks' canvasses, none of the gut-wrenching scenarios we imagine come to pass, and perfect peace prevails. The wolf dwells with the lamb. The cow and the bear and the lion feed together on straw. I suppose turtles and goldfish play with each other. A little child leads them all. *They shall not hurt nor destroy on all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.* To understand what Isaiah means when he speaks of the earth's being full of the knowledge of the Lord, we go all the way back to the first two chapters of Genesis, where we find Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, living in perfect peace with God, with each other, and with the animal kingdom. No creature kills or eats any other. God says, "*And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of*

the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.”

Not too many Episcopalians interpret Genesis with the flat literalism of the fundamentalists. I certainly don't. Instead, what we read there is deeper truth, and a more compelling vision: that the mind of God for the created order is perfect peace and harmony. God's intention for all creatures of the earth is that they should mingle together without fear of violence. The peaceable kingdom is the way things ought to be. It is the peace of God that passes all understanding. Do we dare accept such a gift, and even try live it? Some years ago in my previous parish I was having lunch with a member of the Vestry. I met him at his office, and we planned to eat at the corporate cafeteria. It was a Friday in Lent, so they were serving fish – Atlantic cod, to be exact. We brought our trays back to the table and realized that the cod was looking less and less appetizing. My friend stuck a fork in his piece, held the whole thing up and declared, “The piece of cod which passeth all understanding.” I served many more years in that church, but not once afterward was I able to look in the direction of this one Vestry member while I gave the final blessing. I was afraid I'd burst out laughing!

If the piece of cod passed all understanding, even more so does the peace of God defy our comprehension. We yearn for the peaceable kingdom; we have a primal homesickness for it. We may paint it on canvass, as Hicks did nearly 100 times, but it's not the way nature works. Back to Genesis we go to see the sharp break between the way life ought to be, and the way life is. In Genesis 3 we encounter what is called the fall from grace, after which living things steal the breath of life from each other through violence. No longer is the earth filled with the knowledge of the Lord. No longer do the mind of God and way of earth intermingle with each other as the waters cover the sea. Now we have a sharp divide. Now living things kill and eat one another to survive. The fear and dread of humankind is upon every beast of the earth, and eventually, we too will sleep with the fishes.

So it is that Isaiah's vision defies comprehension. When he first spoke the words it was a time of war for the Jews. Historians debate whether it was war with the Assyrians or war with the Babylonians, but for our purposes today it hardly matters. The point is, it was war. Once again, nation was taking up arms against nation, and we're still at it today. To be sure, warring humankind willfully resists learning the things that make for peace, but the problem seems to go even deeper than our stubborn, conscious rebellion. We're caught up in the consequences of a fallen world, and incapable of finding our way out of them. Will it ever end? Of note, this coming Wednesday will mark the 75th anniversary of the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor that drew us into World War Two. Still to this day, seven and a half decades on, drops of oil leak from the sunken wreck of the battleship, Arizona, where over one-thousand sailors died. Survivors soon began referring to the drops of oil as “black tears,” as if the ship herself continues to weep for all the dead entombed within her.

When comes the time when God shall wipe away every tear from our eyes? Both Isaiah and John the Baptist, from whom we heard in today's Gospel reading from Matthew (3:1-12), knew that the peaceable kingdom could only be inaugurated through the coming of the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Savior. Isaiah looked from afar. John declared that the kingdom of heaven was at hand in Jesus. Isaiah and John are the prophets of Advent because they encourage us to look for the coming of God as our hope. It's the coming of God that will restore all creation to God's intended purposes. It's the coming of God that will fulfill our deepest yearnings for peace. Diplomacy, politics, moral effort, and religion all have their place; they can certainly serve in concert with God's purposes and intermingle with God's intentions. We should never grow careless in these duties, but neither should we mistake them as the source of our salvation. They do not save in the profoundest sense of the term.

Only the coming of God can achieve the peaceable kingdom. And so in Advent we pray, “Come, Lord Jesus.” Come, Lord Jesus, not only to a manger in Bethlehem long ago, not only far

off in the future at the end of time to judge the living and the dead. But come, Lord Jesus, today, into the hearts and souls and minds of this congregation here present. In a moment's time we'll come forward to receive the bread and wine of the Eucharist. If the Communion we share means anything at all, it is that Christ comes to the here and now to fill our selves, souls, and bodies with his life and peace. And those who are filled with the Spirit of Christ find that they can do all things through him who strengthens them.

In today's reading from Matthew, John the Baptist called the people to repent before they could enter the peaceable kingdom. Perhaps we can define repentance as choosing every opportunity we can to rise above the way of the jungle. So let me tell you about two strikingly different people whose life and legacy can help us glimpse God's day of peace that even now dimly shines. The first is none other than Winston Churchill, the Prime Minister of England during World War Two. Churchill exemplified that we can never have peace in our time unless people of good will stand up to the bullies of the world and fight back. Nevertheless, after the war he wrote these surprising words:

*Those who are prone by temperament and character to seek sharp and clear-cut solutions of difficult and obscure problems, who are ready to fight whenever some challenge comes from a foreign Power, have not always been right. On the other hand, those whose inclination is to bow their heads, to seek patiently and faithfully for peaceful compromise, are not always wrong. On the contrary, in the majority of instances they may be right, not only morally but from a practical standpoint. How many wars have been averted by patience and persisting good will! Religion and virtue alike lend their sanctions to meekness and humility, not only between men but between nations. How many wars have been precipitated by firebrands! How many misunderstandings which led to wars could have been removed by temporizing!*¹ Churchill's words are sobering to a sabre rattling world.

The second person whose example can inspire us to live even now in the peaceable kingdom is none other than St. Francis of Assisi. In the town of Gubbio, just north of Assisi, it seems that the people lived in terror of a huge wolf that would attack anyone who ventured outside the walls. The people called upon Francis for help, and the saintly man went out to the wolf unarmed. St. Francis called to the beast, "Brother Wolf, in the name of Jesus Christ, I order you not to hurt me or anyone." To make a long story short, somehow St. Francis was able to make peace with the wolf, as only St. Francis could do. He made the people promise that they would feed the wolf every day for as long as it lived, and he made the wolf promise to submit to the people and live with them in peace. Then he led the animal into the town square and preached a sermon with the wolf curled up at his feet. It is said that the wolf and the people lived together in peace and with affection. And when the wolf finally grew old and died, they buried it as if they were saying farewell to a beloved family dog.

The Wolf of Gubbio is a lovely story that touches our deep longing for Isaiah's peaceable kingdom. But seriously: it's not the way the world works. At the end of the day, wolves are wolves and lions are lions and turtles are turtles. The story is just a legend, isn't it? Perhaps so, but what is also true is that when the ancient church at Gubbio was undergoing some recent restoration, the bones of a wolf were found buried within the sacred confines².

It makes me wonder. And it makes me yearn even more for God's peaceable kingdom, where *the wolf will 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. They will not hurt nor destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.*

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

¹ Winston S. Churchill, The Gathering Storm, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1948.

² Jim Forest, The Ladder of the Beatitudes, Orbis Books, 1999.