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At least two famous works of art – probably more – are called “The Peaceable Kingdom.” One is the famous art work of Edward Hicks: I’m sure you’ve all seen it somewhere along the way in your life. He was the iconic Quaker minister and artist whose semi-primitive paintings of wolves and lambs, and lions and cows, and children playing amongst them come to mind when we hear these words of Isaiah. Actually Hicks painted over 100 versions of the Peaceable Kingdom. If I were more tech savvy I’d project it for you; but instead please project it on the screen of your mind’s eye and imagine what Hicks was portraying theologically with his work.

Hicks' painting reflects the Quaker principle of “Inner Light”. George Fox preached that salvation is attained by yielding one’s self-will to the divine will of “Christ within”. In Hicks’ work we can physically see how the Inner Light breaks down differences between creatures so that they can live and work together in peace. In the background there is a portrayal of Native Americans signing a peace treaty with William Penn, one of Hicks’ heroes. Calmness and peace infuse these scenes with Christ’s light shining forth.

Another great artistic work more up my alley is in the musical genre: Randall Thompson’s set of eight musical pieces called “The Peaceable Kingdom” which I was lucky to sing in Glee Club and have always loved it
Thompson was actually inspired by seeing Hicks’ painting. He read through all 66 chapters of Isaiah to find passages that would carry this message of peace and righteousness. The first song begins “Say Ye To the Righteous It shall be well with them. For they shall eat the fruit of their doings.” This particular piece is based on the

metaphors in First Isaiah and is expressed with lush choral harmony. Go listen to it on YouTube.

“The Peaceable Kingdom”

“God’s Holy Mountain.”

These are iconic images that we love to contemplate, but we are fairly certain we will never see in our lifetimes, or even on earth ever at all. They remain in the realm of God’s future Kingdom, a hope, a dream. What does your dream look like?

Occasionally as a child I would think about particular religious ideas I’d heard in Sunday school, and then find a stumbling block as I tried to follow my own train of thought. For example, I have a clear memory of trying to decipher this idea of heaven as that static image we all have in our heads, especially around Christmas, with blue skies and fluffy clouds supporting hosts of angels (and they are always hosts) playing music. Sometimes there’s God on a throne, or St. Peter standing faithfully by the Pearly Gates. What always troubled me was that there’s no real movement or action in the scene. My childhood question was “Doesn’t anything ever happen in heaven?” Is it just some relatively static scene – maybe like those paintings in the Harry Potter books – that show some inconsequential movement, but don’t really go anywhere? If I’m honest, I still feel like that about the traditional view of heaven and The Peaceable Kingdom painting.

And here’s the thing: in order for there to be some sort of story, some sort of narrative or movement, there has to be a conflict. Do you remember all those classifications from your high school English literature class? (Do they still teach it this way, you English teachers out there?) There are three basic types of conflict in a piece of literature: first, MAN against HIMSELF. (Please forgive that this is still in the gender-laden language of the sixties from when I was in h.s. and I’m not sure how to translate.) Next there are conflicts expressed as MAN against MAN. Lastly, there are narratives which set MAN against NATURE. If that’s still what we’re calling it, it describes the kind of conflict – more precisely, the lack of this kind of conflict – which

we find in the Peaceable Kingdom. All those natural pairs of creatures that are supposed to be enemies (and there are many in this passage) are all defying nature: wolf and lamb, leopard and goat kid, calf and lion, cow and bear, human babies and snakes, all being nice and companionable with one another.

This is not how it works in the real world. This 2000 year old poem just doesn't describe the real world as we know it. But remember that the prophet is speaking to a group of people who are without much hope at all, and they are longing for it, longing for a dream of peace. They had been fighting for some forty years already: with the Assyrians, then Egyptians, with the Assyrians again, then the Egyptians again . Their children were raised so they could fight as soon as they could hold a weapon, ever more fodder for the unending war. Isaiah is just tired of war, and longing for peace. So are his compatriots.

At the center of their faith is El Shaddai, the God of the mountain, the Holy Mountain of God's peace. This week, as I contemplated this image for probably the tenth time in my years of preaching, I'm struck by a new thought: this picture is not one of God's creation alone. That is, not all these creatures are "god-made" even counting the process of evolution. All of these domesticated animals have also been shaped by the forces of human creative molding, through domestication and selective breeding. There would be no such thing as a sheep without a human hand in its creation.

Take the wolf and the lamb, our original pair of the day, pictured on our cover. Think for a moment: wolves are as wild as God made them, but lambs are not. Sheep were one of the first mammals to be domesticated for use by human herders, both for meat, milk and hide, somewhere between 9-11K years ago. But here's the funny thing: the wolf was actually the very first mammal domesticated by human beings at least 20K years ago, earlier than any other creature. Dogs have been with us long before we were herders of sheep or farmers of grain, during the time we were still hunter gatherers.

Now there's an image we could realistically imagine on God's holy mountain together: a dog and a lamb..... all those lovely border collies who work with sheep every day. If that were in our picture, then there would be no issue of violence, predator or prey.... That change from wild to domestic animals was purposely accomplished by human beings.

The other remarkable fact is that food crops were just starting to be domesticated about the same time as the herd animals, like sheep, goats, cows and pigs. So Cain and Adam, the original farmer and cowhand, must have gotten into their squabbles slightly before 10,000 BC. A few thousand years after that was the last major examples of domestication which occurred when horses were bred to help move things, by being ridden, or by pulling, likewise other draft animals like yak and oxen.

The Peaceable Kingdom: a world without conflict, where Man is not against himself, not against another Man, and not fighting but cooperating with Nature. And the incredible thing? Human beings themselves **are** capable of creating such cooperation. Those folk listening to Isaiah? Such a place must have sounded like paradise to war-torn people. This cooperative, beneficent dream of species gathering happily together is so deeply engrained in us that it continues to echo through our Christmas scenes, the manger full of happy animals safely surrounding the vulnerable human infant.

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Now flash to a very different scene some 800 years later: John, the cousin of Jesus. He was about as wild a man as they come, even then at the time of Christ. Wearing wild skins. Eating locusts and honey. Shouting and screaming like a mad man.

John had been on a spiritual journey in the untouched wilderness. He comes barging back to the Jordan at the edge of their civilized world, with a God-given message. These people are at another low point in their communal history. They are stressed and impoverished by the colonization of the Romans. Sure, they call it "Pax Romana" - the Roman peace - but there was no fighting back only because the Romans were

too powerful and organized a force to fight against. The people are oppressed. John comes from wilderness screaming at the people: “You yourselves have become too domesticated! This is not how God taught you to live – you need to repent”

Ugh. There’s that difficult word, right here in the middle of our attempt to create this peaceful and calm mood. We always get John the Baptist at least once during Advent, sometimes twice. He’s just too much, this guy who screams about repenting and calls us names, but never talks about the other side of things, the possibility of forgiveness or grace. We don’t like feeling as if we’re being scolded.

David Lose, of the website called “The Working Preacher” has this to say:

“Repentance, after all, isn’t about feeling bad or saying, “I’m sorry.” Rather, it’s about a re-orientation, a change of perspective and direction, a commitment to turn and live differently. And so John in this week’s reading challenges his audience not to define themselves or limit their hopes based on their ancestry or their piety, but rather to dream a larger hope and grander vision, to work toward a better world by ‘bearing fruits worthy of repentance.’”

He suggests a brief Advent discipline that some of us might want to try.

- (1) Make your “to do” list for Advent: shopping, concerts, parties, etc
- (2) Daydream about what you hope Christmas will be like – what kind of relationships we’ll have, what joy we can create, how we can contribute to the safety of all God’s children
- (3) Go back and look at the “to do” list and circle those things that will contribute directly to your hopes for this Christmas.

Change is never comfortable. It’s especially difficult in the midst of familiar and cozy Christmas routines. But sometimes we are called to reorientation, resetting our compass.

Here is a compelling example of something that requires our prayer and action right away. In the midst of writing this sermon yesterday, we local clergy received a message from our friend, the local Imam Islam Hassan.

His community has received a hate mail by U.S. post. No doubt it is some mass mailing that will probably not result in local trouble: but it is meant to spread division and fear and separate us from our brothers and sisters in the mosque. This cannot stand. All of our colleagues have assured the Imam that we will speak out against this hate crime on this day, and will probably organize some particular act of solidarity soon.

Yes, this is the Christmas season. And no, this is not comfortable for any of us. But it is a hateful act that must be called out as we stumble our way toward God's holy mountain.

Rev. Bruce Epperly concludes his study of this week's text by saying:

"We are the Advent change we seek: apart from us, there will be no peaceable realm... John's radical vision, preparing the way for Jesus, challenges us to prepare the way for Jesus' mission in our time. Our preparation is a matter of deeds as well as words. Walking in the way of Jesus involves a commitment to constant transformation and renewal, to changing our ways in response to God's wondrous gifts of grace. Like John, we are challenged to ... recognize that Christ's presence demands a radical reorientation of values so that we might recognize the realm of God already emerging in our midst. " Let it be so.