Peace on Earth, Goodwill to All: Imagining a New World with Isaiah
by Ellen Williams Hensle, 12/7/25

"The wolf did with the lambkin dwell in peace/ his grim carnivorous nature there did cease. The leopard with the harmless kid lay down/ and not one savage beast was seen to frown. The lion with the fatling on did move/ a little child was leading them in love; When the great Penn his famous treaty made/ with Indian chiefs beneath the Elm-trees shade."[1]

With this rhyme Edward Hicks surrounded one of the perhaps 100 versions of "the Peaceable Kingdom" that he painted in his lifetime. Born in Bucks County in 1780, Hicks was a well-regarded Quaker preacher and minister, as well being by trade a carriage painter and sign painter. In his spare time, he made art, art that he gave away to friends and family and church connections.

In the primitive Quaker religion Hicks practiced, worldly passions were discouraged – believers were supposed to "purge undesirable creaturely concerns from their lives so that they would be filled and guided by the divine grace of God."[2] Decorative art was considered by some Quakers one of those undesirable creaturely concerns to be purged – to the extent that at one point in his life Hicks gave up his carriage and sign painting business in favor of the more religiously acceptable lifestyle of farming. Seeing as he didn't know how to farm, he nearly led his family to financial ruin. So he went back to painting, both for business and for pleasure.

Though Hicks painted a few scenes of farms and homesteads and animals streaming onto Noah's ark, he is most famous for his depictions of the Peaceable Kingdom as described in Isaiah 11: the wolf living with the lamb, the leopard lying down with the kid; the cow and bear grazing together, the lion eating straw like the ox; and a little child to lead them. Hicks's earliest versions of the Peaceable Kingdom are relatively straightforward: a few animals standing together with an innocent-looking child.

But as he painted the scene over and over again, his compositions became more intricate. In the version that appears on your bulletin cover, probably from around 1834, there is not only an angelic child leading the animals at the top of the frame, but also more human-seeming children playing toward the bottom – you can see that one of those children is petting a very docile leopard on the nose.[3] At the bottom right, a bear and a cow are literally grazing together, chewing on the same stalk of wheat. And it's a bit hard to see in our small reproduction, but those blonde wisps around the lion's mouth are not only his whiskers, but the straw he is eating, having put aside his own carnal desires in favor of a vegetarian diet.

In many versions of this painting, Hicks also includes a small background scene on the left side of the picture: an image of William Penn and his Quaker counterparts signing a peace treaty with the Lenape, the Native Americans indigenous to this area of Pennsylvania. This gathering between native people and Penn's Quakers – a gathering to agree on terms for sharing the land with one another in harmony – the historical evidence that such a meeting ever took place is mixed.

But some 100 years removed from the life of William Penn, Edward Hicks was sure that the gathering *had* taken place, and he found it a continual source of inspiration. To him it was proof that the kind of peace described in Isaiah 11 was indeed possible this side of heaven. Groups of people who would ordinarily be at odds with one another could come together and figure out how to live side by side, like the wolf living with the lamb and the leopard lying down with the kid. And so in the background of his depictions of the Peaceable Kingdom, Hicks often included a small grouping of Lenape and Quakers conversing together under the treaty oak.

As the years went by and Hicks returned to his favorite subject over and over, he began to add another element to his compositions: a tree in the top righthand corner. In the version of this tree that appears on the bulletin cover, half the leaves are green, while the other half are brown. Over time Hicks's tree became ever more fractured, often appearing with a large crack down the center. Sometimes he even added a second tree, broken and gnarled.

Art historians believe that this tree represents Hicks's grief over the factions that had developed in the Quaker tradition in America at this time. As the divisions between the opposing groups grew, so did Hicks's frustration and sadness that the very believers who made peace their way of life could not make peace with one another. His dream of one united family of Quakers was becoming a dream for a distant future rather than a near one. And so the clefts in the trees of his Peaceable Kingdoms grew deeper.

I imagine Hicks there, in the evenings by candlelight after long days of work, painting his Peaceable Kingdoms, one after another after another. Perhaps he painted them as a constructive outlet for his emotions, a way to express his grief and pain at what was happening in his faith tradition. Or maybe he painted them as a kind of prayer, as a way of keeping bright in his mind's eye a vision – a vision of his own world and the whole world at peace, a vision of the wolf living with the lamb and the leopard lying down with the kid, a vision of the calf and the lion feeding together, with a little child to lead them.

How do we keep bright a dream of peace in a world of division and fear? Making art is not a bad option. For his part, the prophet Isaiah wrote poetry. With frustration over the leadership of King Ahaz growing and the spectre of an Assyrian invasion casting a shadow over his nation's future, Isaiah penned the verses we are reading today. In these verses he imagines the rise of a righteous ruler in the line of King David, son of Jesse, a ruler who will be full of God's Spirit and ever mindful of God's presence. This ruler will see beyond what is visible to the naked eye, through to the deep truth of things – and with this clarity of sight he will help the poor, lift up the oppressed and speak judgment to the wicked. His reign of justice will usher in a new day of peace, when former enemies will coexist in friendship and children will play safely wherever they wish.

When Isaiah wrote this prophecy, he most likely had in mind Ahaz's son, Hezekiah – perhaps *he* would be the righteous ruler the nation longed for. Of course Christians have read in this passage a clear description of the Messiah, Jesus Christ – One who is full of the Spirit, One who sees to the very heart of things, One who judges with justice and ushers in a new day of peace for the whole family of creation.

Like Isaiah, like Edward Hicks, we are still waiting for a world where the wolf will live with the lamb and the leopard will lie down with the kid, still waiting for the world to know the fullness of peace God intends for us. As Christians we are people of the already/not yet – we give thanks that God has already come in Jesus Christ to offer us forgiveness for our sins and peace with God. And we are still waiting for the day that has not yet come, the day when Christ will come again in final victory to usher in a world of perfect peace, peace for all that lives.

In the meantime, how do we keep the vision bright? Perhaps we might join the prophet and the painter in the work of creativity – putting pen to paper or paintbrush to canvas to imagine a world more peaceful than our own. In chapter after chapter, Isaiah finds new ways to express the hope God has given him for the future, be it swords beaten into plowshares or predators sleeping peacefully with their prey or the desert in full bloom or every valley being lifted up to make straight a highway for our God. When Isaiah lets his imagination run free, he can picture so many different images of the world made new by God's grace. What images of the world made new might we visualize in our own time? A vacant lot turned into a pocket park for kids to play in? A long table where people of different races and religions come together to share a meal? God invites us to unbridle our imaginations and join the prophets in the work of picturing redemption.

For his part, Edward Hicks returned over and over again to the same scene – but he was always finding new details to add, new emotions to capture. There's something I find deeply hopeful about Hicks's repetition of the Peaceable Kingdom, 60, 70, 100 times. Even as his dream of unity moved further toward the horizon, he kept painting the docile lion and the angelic child. He refused to give up on the vision. It seems that painting it was a kind of spiritual discipline for him, a practice, a way to repeat and so remember the hope for peace God had given him. Spiritual disciplines like daily prayer or journaling or art making can certainly help us stay connected to God and God's hopes for the future of our world, especially in the already/not yet of Advent.

And at the same time, there is something so absurd about this particular vision of Isaiah's. Lions eating straw? Bears and cows chewing on the same stalk of wheat? Not really sure how that's going to happen. It's certainly not within the power of human beings to change the diet of a lion or the predatory nature of a leopard. Some of Edward Hicks's early versions of the Peaceable Kingdom capture this inherent absurdity – the lion stares directly at the viewer with a huge grin on his face. Uncanny.

But this absurdity reminds us that Isaiah's vision of the wolf living with the lamb is not something that we can accomplish on our own. It is a future that God is bringing. We participate in the work of making peace – that is an important part of our Christian calling. But ultimately, our peace depends on Christ's coming – coming into our hearts and coming into our world. Our responsibility is to stay open to possibility.

Yesterday morning I looked out our bedroom window to see if it was still snowing. It wasn't, but I did notice something on the windowsill. When we moved from Texas last year we stashed all our plants on the same wide sill in the dormer window – I think Tom waters them, but I have mostly forgotten them. Just the same, our orchid, which I was sure was dead, whose leaves are literally covered in dust – when I went to the windowsill I noticed that our orchid has tiny buds on it. Not new stalks coming out of the roots, but thin green shoots coming out of the tops of old gnarled stems, stems I had just been thinking we ought to cut down to their base. There they are, tiny fragile buds growing toward the light. This beauty stopped me in my tracks. A shoot coming out of the stump of Jesse. New life where there looked to be death. An everyday miracle, grace upon grace. I carefully removed a stem clip that was constricting the growth of one of the buds – my small human contribution to encourage the flourishing of this un-looked-for but most welcome sign of new life.

I was reminded of the words of author and bookstore owner Annie B. Jones: "I (almost) always come limping into Advent, desperate for the light, but almost too tired to look for it. Then I remember: the Light came looking for me, and that's the whole point."