

Waiting for Peace: Anticipating an Isaiah-Jesus Christmas

Isaiah 11:1-9
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While an adult, Isaiah had a child-centered vision wherein the carnivorous animals have no appetite for the herbivore animals they would usually consume to satisfy their hunger. That world – as the prophet described – had not yet come into being when Jesus was born 700 years later. While the faith-tradition from Luke’s writings indicates Jesus was born in a stable-barn where herbivores usually stay – sheep, cattle, donkeys, chickens, etc. – it was not a world where a calf can lie safely with a lion, nor a sheep with a bear, nor a goat with a wolf or leopard. Jesus was born into a still dangerous world, every bit as dangerous as the world in which Isaiah experienced his vision 700 years before; and who of us would argue that the world 2000 years after Jesus is anything other than still a dangerous place?

If you have recently been watching television at 10:30 p.m., you may have seen comedian and satirist Stephen Colbert last Wednesday night. Sometimes his show features a skit in which a Michelangelo-type image of God appears on the ceiling of the Ed Sullivan Theatre where the show is filmed. On Wednesday night, when the image appeared, Colbert asked God if President Donald Trump’s announcement recognizing Jerusalem as Israel’s capital was incentive for God to move back there. The characterization of God replied: “No way, for two reasons: (1) Going to Jerusalem didn’t work out so well for my Son 2,000 years ago; and (2) folks there are too up-tight. I want some place more laid back, like maybe Austin!” You may or may not agree with Mr. Colbert’s God-skit, but who of us would argue that the world is not – to this very day – a dangerous place? This morning we certainly can ask two questions: (1) “How does the vision of Isaiah relate to faith and discipleship in 2017? AND (2) how does Isaiah’s vision relate to being a Presbyterian church officer in 2017, ’18, and ’19 – since we today ordain and install this new class of elders?”

Given these two questions, I ask you to consider the Edward Hicks’ painting which is printed on the bulletin insert below the elders’ ordination and installation questions.



Between 1820 and 1849, Edward Hicks painted around a hundred scenes which included similar but often distinct versions of the prophet Isaiah’s chapter 11 vision, referred to as “The Peaceable Kingdom.” Central to Edward Hicks’ faith as a religious person in the Society of Friends’ (or Quaker) tradition is peace with fairness and justice for all, as Jesus taught and lived. A native of Pennsylvania, Edward Hicks greatly admired the example of William Penn, who died in 1718, which was 62 years before Edward Hicks was born. William Penn – who was Governor of the Pennsylvania Colony – believed in the humanity of Native Americans as much as he did in the humanity of European immigrants. So the signing of Penn’s Treaty with the Native Americans in 1682 is a scene pictured to the left in many of Edward Hicks’ “Peaceable Kingdom” paintings (but not in this one). In those paintings, Hicks is portraying on canvas a statement of faith coming-to-life in real-time. The vision of God’s peaceable

kingdom – for Edward Hicks – represents “a future from God, drawing God’s people forward.” Governor William Penn’s contract purchase of land and positive regard for the Native Americans in his large colony occurred as it did (in Edward Hicks’ estimation) because God’s own vision comes alive in the world precisely to draw God’s people forward toward the peaceable kingdom.

Being drawn forward toward God’s vision as expressed by Isaiah, though, must take account of our on-going human resistance and failure. 45 years after William Penn’s death, his treaty with the Native Americans in the Penn Colony was cast aside like a plastic cup thrown from the window of passing car or truck. On December 14, 1763, six Native Americans of the Conestoga Tribe were massacred in the township where they lived according to the terms of a mutual treaty. On December 27, the other 14 of their tribe were massacred in Lancaster where they had been taken into protective custody. Their murderers were European immigrants with roots back to Northern Ireland and a Presbyterian religious heritage. The Presbyterians in Western Pennsylvania had little regard for the “peaceable kingdom / fairness-and-good-neighbor approach” of William Penn’s tradition. The Paxton Boys – as this gang was called – were racists and land-grabbers who believed in no democratic authority beyond their own desires.

When the murders of the Conestogas occurred, a Quaker named Elias Hicks was 15 years old. Elias would be a 32 year old adult when his second cousin Edward Hicks was born. The younger Edward admired his relative as much as Edward admired William Penn, whom he only knew from Penn’s historical legacy. Through the years of Edward’s growing to adulthood, Elias’ ministry was extremely influential on Edward; but Elias was controversial among some of his fellow-Quakers. Elias wrote and preached how the inner light of God’s Spirit is continually available to awaken the inner spirit of each person’s life and relationships. Elder Elias ran afoul, not with the Presbyterians, but with other Quakers who preferred for faith to be “individually religious” in personal inner piety. Elias’ opponents among his fellow Quakers understood faith mostly for the purpose of connecting individuals to God, but not so much for believers to be led by God’s Spirit as advocates of public policy and drawn toward God’s peace which desires justice for all.

In the 1820s, when Elias Hicks was approaching 80 years old, the Quakers in the Northeast split between what we might call the “individual faith/orthodox” group and the “God’s peace-with-respect-for-all group.” At the time of this split, the “individual faith” group forced Elias and others out of their society, regarding them as heretics. When Elias died in 1830, Edward painted the version of the peaceable kingdom printed this morning with our elders’ ordination and installation questions. William Penn’s 1682 treaty signing is not painted into this version. Instead, Elias is pictured being received into heaven (we resume) by Quakers who have died over 100 years before, including William Penn, George Fox, and Robert Barclay. Wrapped around them all, a ribbon banner has printed on it words from God’s angel to shepherds outside of Bethlehem on the night of Jesus’ birth: “Behold, I bring you great tidings of great joy . . . peace on earth and good will to men!”

Edward Hicks’ peaceable kingdom paintings were “protest and witness” art against any human tendencies Edward Hicks judged to be uncharitable and self-promoting. Instead, he advocated respect for humans who are racially different and respect for all who hold theologically different opinions from the power majority. For Edward, Native Americans count! For Edward, his cousin Elias counts! Counting others as equals is essential for God’s vision of the peaceable kingdom to come-to-life 700 years before Jesus, during Jesus life-time, or on any day in history since then. It’s easy for a faith community to get caught up in measuring up to a version of faith that “helps me feel positive by sticking with my group, as my group prefers to operate.” In that style: carnivores devour herbivores; European immigrants massacre Native Americans; those who prefer “selfie-religion” exclude others who believe God’s Spirit leads persons to develop public policy based on “all-citizen-fairness” with Jesus as the true model and mentor.

Current University of Georgia football coach (and theologian, whether he knows it or not) Kirby Smart has told his players: “If you want to change the future, you need to start today.” The vision from Isaiah of a peaceable kingdom is a vision God has been giving for centuries to draw people forward expressing respect for and fairness with every person – no matter how different. It’s a vision coming to life over and over by the inner light of God’s Spirit, leading people every new day, starting again today, and including 21st century Presbyterians in Brazos County, Texas, among so many others. – All honor and praise be to God.