



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. CANON JENNIFER KING DAUGHERTY, CANON FOR ENGAGEMENT & CONNECTION
THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT, DECEMBER 4, 2022
ISAIAH 11:1-10; PSALM 72:1-7, 18-19; ROMANS 15:4-13; MATTHEW 3:1-12

ADVENT LONGING



“The Peaceable Kingdom,” by Edward Hicks, 1836.

If you attended the “O Antiphons” liturgy last Sunday evening, today is the second time in a week you’ve heard this reading from Isaiah, chapter 11. It is a portion of scripture that is rich in symbolism and loaded with power – it consoled the ancient Israelites in their exile under the Babylonians, it framed John the Baptist’s wilderness proclamations, it

inspired 8th century Christian worship, a 17th century idea of the Peaceable Kingdom, 19th century Quaker values, and shapes our own experience of Advent longing. But I’m getting ahead of myself. I’ll back up with some context.

In this passage, Isaiah addresses exiled Israelites caught in the crossfire of warring kings and under the thumb of a corrupt ruling class. Using King David, son of Jesse, as a touchstone, Isaiah proclaims the coming of a new leader (the branch from the stump of Jesse) who will usher in an age of justice and peace, a leader whose authority rests on wisdom rather than military power. His very breath the reverence of God.

Isaiah's vision of this new age reflects the desires of his culture and is illustrated by the safety and well-being of young creatures. New-born lambs and calves rest alongside their former predators. Infants play near the nests of venomous snakes without fear of being hurt.

It's not that Isaiah literally thought the natural order of the animal kingdom would be turned upside down, but he needs hyperbole to show the depth of the people's longing for the end of violence. A place where there is no evil or ruin, and all are filled with the knowledge of God. Isaiah later says liberation is coming: "A voice cries out in the wilderness: clear a way for the Lord's road; the mountains and ravines will become a level highway for the exiles' return."

So, when John the Baptist appears, preaching repentance to "prepare the way of the Lord," the 1st C Palestinians would have recalled this

centuries-old promise. They too are caught in the whipsaw of imperial occupation and a corrupt ruling class. They don't want small tweaks around the edges of their unjust social and economic lives. They dream of an inbreaking of something completely new.

John's vision of this new age arises from the desires of his culture – a place where all are claimed as God's own, not just the elite. So, when John proclaims a new leader is coming to usher in this kingdom, they follow him to the wilderness, longing to know more.

Remember the wilderness is a powerful and symbolic place for the Israelites – a place of historical liberation from Egypt, a place of freedom from the systems of control in the city, a liminal place that provided the quiet and spaciousness for their ancestors to encounter the divine.

Without the distractions and imperatives of the city, the wilderness can bring you face to face with your deepest longings. I imagine that, as they walk, the people recalling Isaiah's vision of a holy community where the wolf and the lamb lie down together.

When the King James Bible was printed in the early 17th century, it included a caption over chapter 11 of Isaiah that read, "The Peaceable Kingdom." You might know this expression, and a picture might come to mind of a calm w

oodland scene with animals lying together – a leopard and baby goat, bear and calf – their heads resting on each other while little children pat them.

If so, you are recalling a painting by Edward Hicks, a Pennsylvania Quaker minister who lived in the early 1800s. Hicks was inspired by this Isaiah passage and the idea of the Peaceable Kingdom – for him, it expressed the deepest longings of the Quaker tradition. Today, 62 paintings of Hick’s Peaceable Kingdom remain.

But they’re not the same. While all his paintings include Isaiah’s animal symbols of longed-for peace and justice, they also include some of Hick’s own longings, too. One scene depicts William Penn meeting peacefully and respectfully with Native Americans. Another shows a tree that has split in two – reflecting the Quaker Church of the time – that is still able to thrive and stay connected. A third places girls in the foreground allied with both an eagle and a dove. His paintings are prayers, mixing the longings of his times with those of former times. They are all one longing, after all, for God to enter our world and show us the way to the Peaceable Kingdom.

Advent is a time of self-reflection and of waiting. We seek wilderness space to consider our lives, to recall encounters with

God’s grace, and to name where we have fallen short, all so our hearts are prepared to become God’s dwelling place at Christmas. It is important spiritual work.

And Advent is a time of longing, too. As the days get colder and we spend more hours in darkness, our yearnings for light, for love, for meaning stir in us. Every day, the violence and destruction in our world quickens our desire for an inbreaking of something completely new.

Naming these longings and connecting them to the desires of Isaiah’s time, and Jesus’ time, and William Hick’s time is also important spiritual work. They connect us with God’s desires for the world and cut to the heart of meaning in our own lives.

So, I wonder, what longings would you add to a picture of the Peaceable Kingdom?

Maybe the hungry and the well-fed eating together, sharing all that is left over.

Children of all races, all means, learning together in warm and safe classrooms.

Young black men playing ball with the police, who have no weapons.

Clear air and oceans brimming with life, Earth’s healing unimpeded.

What do you long for? When we name it, we name God’s longing, too.

The poet John O'Donohue has written a blessing for longing. May it be a prayer to guide us as we wait and prepare this Advent.

Blessed be the longing that brought you here

And quickens your soul with wonder.

May you have the courage to listen to the voice of desire

That disturbs you when you have settled for something safe.

May you have the wisdom to enter generously into your own unease

May you know the urgency with which God longs for you.

To discover the new direction your longing wants you to take.

May the forms of your belonging – in love, creativity, and friendship –

Be equal to the grandeur and the call of your soul.

May a secret Providence guide your thought and nurture your feeling.

May you come to accept your longing as divine urgency.

Amen.

Isaiah 11:1-10 *[A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. 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. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.]*