

**December 4, 2016**  
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**The Peaceable Kingdom?**  
**Isaiah 11:1-10**

This Advent, we are walking through the weeks of preparation for Christmas by looking each week at a magical passage from Isaiah. In this particular Christmas season, in the midst of a country deeply divided, in the midst of a time when many advances in basic human and civil rights that have been gained through blood, sweat and tears over the last century are being defied by many, when hateful speech once taboo is being spoken shamelessly in the light of day, when threats of violence are being carried out openly against many marginalized groups and when there's no longer an assumption that it will even be addressed by those in power much less responded to with decisive action. Things are getting very real, as they say.

Why in the world are we looking at fantasy this Advent, when the very real requires our urgent attention? I submit to you that it is *exactly* the right time for fantasy, exactly the necessary time to dig deeper than ever for the keys to unlock the selves within us that can respond to these seemingly impossible circumstances. And to look for them in the language that can call out our deepest resources – imagination.

So yes, we're going magical this Advent, with a starry night backdrop and all! Last week, we looked at swords being forged into plowshares, (and the Cleveland Browns winning big) and I invited you to consider taking on re-reading (or re-watching, depending on your media of choice) a story as an Advent discipline – a story that captured your imagination, and helped you dream big, about who you wanted to be, or what kind of world was possible.

This week, we're diving into this amazing Isaiah passage that's often referred to as "The Peaceable Kingdom." It's another passage that has deeply inspired Mennonites, Quakers and other Christian peace churches. One of the most famous depictions of The Peaceable Kingdom is by a Quaker painter in the 19<sup>th</sup> century – Edward Hicks. (1) I really shouldn't say, "one of," either, because Hicks painted more than 60 variations of the scene described in Isaiah 11. You might recall some of these paintings, in the somewhat stiff style of American 19<sup>th</sup> century art with a lion, a wolf and a leopard looking into the camera, so to speak, sitting formally alongside placid-looking, cud-chewing livestock, who are studiously avoiding the gaze of the viewer and several fat, white children scattered throughout dressed in Grecian white cloths.

These are odd visions of utopia, both Isaiah's words and Hicks' depictions of them. My version of utopia would be somewhat different. For starters, I'd go much more politically correct with the title of my utopia, and call it A Peaceable Kin-don, or Beloved Community, because the hierarchy and patriarchy of King-dom chafe a bit. But peace in this passage is not a vision of radical equality. It is a vision of individuals with radically differing levels of power and privilege somehow co-habiting, with all those inequalities and differentials still in place. And Hicks' depiction suddenly seems quite realistic -- these predators are looking so stunned and panicked because they still have their predatory instincts and appetites and histories intact, but they're trying desperately not to be hungry for the tasty morsels all around them.

I'm reminded, more than anything, of the "vegetarian" vampires of the young adult fantasy series, *Twilight*, trying to live nobly among humans, all the while desperately trying not to want to eat them. *Twilight* author, Stephenie Meyer, even referenced this Isaiah passage in the first book, when she describes the moment that her human heroine and vampire hero confess their love to each other for the first time:

*"And so the lion fell in love with the lamb..." [the vampire says]*  
*"What a stupid lamb," [says the human]*  
*"What a sick, masochistic lion." [replies the vampire]*

It's actually a pretty apt perspective on the Peaceable Kingdom passage. And isn't this much like the actual world? How *can* there be true peace in a world of such inequity? What does it mean to invite a sheep or a calf or a kid to a picnic with a lion, a leopard or a wolf? I'm reminded of a conversation about "safe" spaces that happened at a gathering of LGBTQ Mennonites a few years ago. They acknowledged that, as much as we all would like it, no one can guarantee anyone else "safety" in any space -- that we can work to lay the groundwork for safety, to make safety much more likely, but that ultimately what might seem like a "safe" space to a person with privilege and power is always going to need to be a "brave" space for someone of less privilege or power to enter.

It's something to think about, in these days when more people are suddenly realizing the necessity of talking with one another, confronting deep-seated racism and sexism and homophobia and on and on ... Yes, white folks should be shutting up and listening to people of color; straight folks listening to gay and queer folks; men listening to women and other genders; Christians to folks in other religious traditions; able-bodied folks listening to

differently-abled. But anytime a request is made for a marginalized person to share or educate, it may seem like a “safe” invitation to a “safe,” “peaceable” picnic: but it requires risk and courage for that person to show up— risk that’s not often acknowledged.

What does the lion have to lose in the Peaceable Kingdom? If order breaks down, the lion’s fine, either way. Those with power and privilege can feel like as long as we *intend* to be safe people and issue safe invitations to safe places that it will follow that we and our places and invitations are, in fact, safe.

For me it’s both the draw and fear of the symbol of the safety pin being used as a symbol of safety to marginalized folks here and now in our country, post-election. I love seeing the desire of so many to proclaim the intention to offer safety, but along with the intention and the invitation has to come deep investment in what it means to actually BE someone who can offer “safety” in any way. It’s not a simple thing. We’re where we are in large part because we haven’t known how to offer safety despite our intentions.

It has been profoundly dismaying and humbling to me to realize just how inadequately enabled I am to provide safety for my immediate family, whose blackness renders them even more profoundly vulnerable in our country right now. I don’t know how to leverage my privilege and I know that I can be a poor ambassador into spaces that require their bravery and vulnerability, insisting that places that are safe to me are therefore safe to them, and then finding out that those places didn’t feel safe at all.

So, while I admire the realism in the midst of Isaiah’s fantasy – that we must find peace, even in the midst of inequity, because if we wait for there to be no inequity before we attempt peace, we will never attempt it at all. I also appreciate that it highlights the reality that for peace to happen, the appetites and habits of the powerful will need to radically change, in ways that will not feel comfortable, much like the stunned, restrained-looking predators in Edward Hicks’ paintings doing their best to deny their habits and natures. But I think there’s also a real lesson for those in privilege to step back and assess whether places and spaces that feel totally peaceful and safe to them, actually are safe for those more vulnerable/marginalized. And to acknowledge that any peace in the midst of deep inequity – will be a forced and fragile peace, at best.

So, in the very same verse of the unlikely pairings of prey and predator, we find this phrase: “and a little child shall lead them.” It’s our theme for Advent this year: “And a Child Shall Lead Them: Waiting with the Eyes of a Child.” You could say that it follows in the sequence of

unlikely prey-predator pairings because it, too, is so unlikely – allowing a child to lead.

In real life, we often give our children inappropriate power in the form of spoiling or lack of boundaries, but we rarely actually give them much chance to practice leadership. I'm not proud to say it, but I can be very dismissive of my kids when they ask inconvenient questions – or when they ask them at inconvenient times. I am so often busy with something pressing at work, or I don't feel like shifting my attention, or I don't want to admit I don't know the answer, or they want to really dive deeply into something and ask the myriad questions that follow, and I want to skate on the surface. In other words, when I'm being dismissive of the children I'm closest to, it's usually not because they're not being insightful, or helpful—it's because I've got my own agenda and I'm not open to suggestions. I'm not willing to be led by them – led off the mental track I was on, or be led in a different direction in my plans. And I don't think I'm alone in this. I observe this not infrequently in parents and other adults.

Interestingly, though, we adults read young adult fiction voraciously, a genre which often has the world literally being saved by a kid leading where no adult was wise or brave enough to go. Every single Scooby Doo mystery ever, was solved “because of those pesky, meddling kids,” right? Think of *Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Ender's Game*, a lot of the books and series that our CMCL kids are reading Sunday mornings during sermons.

When I was a young adult myself, it seemed eminently obvious that a bunch of teens and pre-teens could save the world. As I have moved into middle age, I have sometimes felt resentful about the lack of literary renderings of middle-aged folks being heroic.(2) I continue to enjoy reading and watching young adult fiction and have puzzled over why a 41-year-old is drawn to heroines much younger than myself. Is it just wishful thinking? Regrets over a childhood overly concerned with being the good girl, so living vicariously through fictional risktakers?

One of the young adult books that I enjoyed when I was younger, and have re-read quite a few times, is *Ender's Game* by Orson Scott Card. [Spoiler alert:] In the future it imagines, humans have had one war with an alien species already, and are awaiting a second invasion. So, they begin training young children who have strategic and military capacities. Ender Wiggins quickly stands out as having exceptional capabilities. All the time during the book, he thinks he's being trained on war games, and only discovers at the very end of the book, that while he was “playing” in a virtual cockpit, he had been making decisions on behalf of thousands of

actual adults – soldiers – who were piloting the ships and leading the armies that he thought were pretend. He leads the world to a great military victory, all the while thinking he was playing a game.

It was a devastating plot twist – something that had been play was in fact brutal reality. But his teachers were counting on the fact that Ender would risk more, act more instinctively and with far less inhibition because he believed it was all a game. In “game mode” he was creative and decisive, and not “weighed down” by the concerns of what would it mean for actual people to carry out those orders. In the end, Ender is absolutely devastated, because he believed he had caused so many deaths of his own soldiers, but also that he had succeeded in the genocide of the alien species, and had not known he was making those choices.

How often, though, are we making choices with significant implications, when we think we’re still “practicing” at life? That’s the thing – it’s all real; we don’t get to go through a simulation mode. We’re in a real cockpit the whole time.

It got me to thinking – what if the message for adults, in the phrase, “A child shall lead them,” is about letting your imagination (where your inner child maintains their deepest hold) lead -- bringing your strength, your maturity, your knowledge and your wisdom willingly to bear, but only at the behest of your inner child. Allowing the innocence, the heart, the imagination of your inner child to lead. What if we brought all our gifts and capacities and skills to the service of our inner child; in how we respond to the challenges of our world today? What does your inner child instinctively know? Might we not see solutions that our older selves would dismiss? And then there’s following the lead of the actual children among us. What ideas and observations do they have? How might the adults of our congregation marshal ourselves to follow the lead of our children and youth?

To our children and youth – what are you impatiently, eagerly wishing you could point out to the adults in the congregation? in your schools? in the world?

There’s a fascinating image of new life and hope at the very beginning of today’s passage: the image of a new sprout growing out of a tree stump. Out of a solid but broken foundation, a new generation of the tree is taking over, starting anew. As one commentator said:

*What if we believe this fragile sign is God’s beginning? Perhaps then we will tend the seedling in our hearts, the place where faith longs to break through the hardness of our disbelief. Do not wait for the tree to be full grown. God comes to us in this Advent time and invites us to move beyond*

*counting the rings of the past. We may still want to sit on the stump for a while, and God will sit with us. But God will also keep nudging us: "Look! Look -- there on the stump. Do you see that green shoot growing?"*

*O come, green shoot of Jesse,  
free your people from despair and apathy;  
Forge justice for the poor and the meek,  
Grant safety for the young ones and the weak.  
Rejoice, rejoice!  
Take heart and do not fear,  
God's chosen one, Immanuel, draws near. (3)*

Let us be brave, not just promise safe spaces.

Let us follow the children among us and the children within us.

Let us tend the slender sprout that might even be growing from the stump of the future we thought we were building.

(1) Edward Hicks, "The Peaceable Kingdom." (one version)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Brooklyn\\_Museum\\_-\\_The\\_Peaceable\\_Kingdom\\_-\\_Edward\\_Hicks\\_-\\_overall.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Brooklyn_Museum_-_The_Peaceable_Kingdom_-_Edward_Hicks_-_overall.jpg)

(2) Although I was pleasantly surprised to read that Frodo Baggins was 50 when he set off on the quest to destroy the Ring.

(3) Barbara Lundblad, December 8, 2013,

[https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1940](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1940)