

A sermon for the Parish of the Epiphany, an Episcopal Church in Winchester, Massachusetts, preached by the rector, the Reverend Thomas James Brown, on the Second Sunday of Advent, 5 December 2010, in Year A, based upon Isaiah 11. To God be the glory.

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. . . .
They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain.

Nineteenth-century American artist Edward Hicks loved that vision so much that he painted it more than 100 times: *The Peaceable Kingdom*. I'm sure you've seen it. It hangs in a lot of ministers' offices and elementary school classrooms. The animals are all there: wolf and lamb, leopard and kid, calf and lion. Hicks gave all the animals expressive faces that look a little human. The eyes are big, unnaturally big, wide open, as if they've just been startled by something. In fact, that was the artist's point and intent. This vision is not something one sees every day—or ever, for that matter. It is startling. And, in the middle, a child, a little boy or girl—you can't really tell—his or her eyes are also wide open in astonishment at what is transpiring.

Peace is one of the great and enduring themes of the Bible in both Old and New Testaments. Jesus tells his disciples that when they enter a house they should say a blessing, "Peace be to this house." When he approached Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, Jesus stopped when he saw the city walls and towers and gates gleaming on Mount Zion. He wept and he said, "If only you had known the things that make for peace." And later that very day, as he entered the city to the cheers and hosannas of the crowd, the people said, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven!"

The first thing the risen Christ said to his disciples when he appeared in their midst was "Peace be with you." And when the first Christians worshiped, they "passed the peace," repeating the words of the risen Lord as they embraced or shook hands: "Peace be with you."

This morning we're given one of the most eloquent expressions of a yearning for peace, it comes from the prophet Isaiah. The scene is land that's been laid waste, trees shattered, a battlefield on which the army of Israel was once again defeated. But look, says the prophet, out of a stump, a dried-up stump, will come a green shoot, a shoot of Jesse, who was David's father. Life comes from death, all the time.

Still there's not escaping the fact that there's never been a time when there wasn't a war happening somewhere in the world. Christians have always had to live in the tension between Isaiah's peaceable kingdom and the real world, between Jesus' teaching about peaceful nonviolence and a world where tyranny and cruelty lurk just beneath the surface.

The longing for peace is so deep that sometimes it causes us to act irresponsibly and dangerously. After the appalling slaughter of World War I, with huge armies facing one another and killing one another, decimating an entire generation of young Germans and French and British, the world said, "No more. Never again." Two decades later, when Nazi Germany began to threaten its neighbors, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain went to Munich to meet Adolph Hitler, negotiated away most of what was Czechoslovakia, and returned to England to announce that he had achieved "peace in our time." It was no such thing, of course.

The fourth-century theologian Augustine said that while war is always tragic and evil, it is also sometimes necessary. He called it the just war theory. Closer to our own time, many American Christians turned to pacifism after World War I and its senseless slaughter.

Ministers have always counseled with young men and women whose commitment to peace would not allow them to bear arms and fight: conscientious objection. And our government, at its best, has allowed for that personal conscience-informed expression by providing alternative ways to serve. But just as important are all those young men and women who abhor war and yearn for peace, yet feel responsible to be part of whatever is happening to, or by, our nation. Peter Gomes, in his book, *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*, tells about a Harvard student who talked to him about responsibility after 9/11 and wanting to serve, ended up joining the Marine Corps, going to Iraq, served there with distinction, and struggled mightily with the morality of the decision. He was not a conscientious objector nor a “pass-the-ammunition” warrior. He was a “conscientious participant,” Gomes said. We need to be mindful of him—praying for him and the many like him (see p. 117).

We still live in the tension between the yearning for peace, the Peaceable Kingdom, the Peace of Jesus Christ, and the reality of the world. And we need, perhaps more than ever, to wait and watch for signs of peace, for the tiny, green shoot, sprouting from the stump of Jesse.

It is Advent and the child is coming. Peace will be our gift.

Frederick Buechner wrote,

The kingdom of God is so close we can almost reach out our hands and touch it. It is so close that sometimes it almost reaches out and takes us by the hand. . . . All over the world you can hear it stirring, if you stop to listen. Good things are happening in and through all sorts of people. . . . Tolerance, Compassion, Sanity, Hope, Justice.

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.

Amen.