

## Wolves and sheep will live together in peace

Isaiah 11:1-10

December 6, 1998

I want you to imagine for a moment that you are an artist. I want you to imagine for a moment that you are an accomplished painter. Now, if you are like me, that is going to take a great deal of imagination!

I want you to imagine fashioning a painting that represents your image of peace, your vision of a world at peace. Think about that painting for a moment. What does your image of peace, your vision of peace, look like?

What would be in your picture? Would it be filled with people? Or in your imagination's eye is it a peopleless landscape, maybe a serene spot? Is it painted with soft colors, or with bright and vivid and joyful colors? Is your painting of peace realistic, or is it abstract? Is it an imagined scene, or does your painting depict an actual scene from your own life?

There was a painter in the early years of our country who painted his vision of peace. His name was Edward Hicks. He did a painting entitled *The Peaceable Kingdom*. He painted as many as a hundred versions of this painting over the course of his life. There are some differences among the various paintings, but they are all depictions of the same basic scene out of Isaiah.

This was his favorite subject. He did not consider himself an artist, just a folk artist, but again and again and again he painted this scene out of Isaiah. He was a Quaker minister who lived around the turn of the nineteenth century and this was his favorite subject, "The Peaceable Kingdom."

As you look at the painting, notice the depiction in the foreground of the scene out of Isaiah itself ...

*Wolves and sheep will live together in peace ...* see the wolf looking over the back of the sheep lying in front of him!

*Leopards will lie down with young goats ...* here's the leopard and here's the little goat in there behind him.

*Calves and lion cubs will feed together and little children will take care of them ...* here is the little child with his arm around the lion cub and another little calf standing behind.

*Cows and bears will eat together [and] lions will eat straw as cattle do ...* here's the cow chomping on straw, and here is the lion next to him with some straw in his mouth as well.

*Even a baby will not be harmed if it plays near a poisonous snake ...* look at the two little babies playing over top of a snake hole in the ground.

This part of Hicks's painting is a very literal depiction of the text from Isaiah. But notice what he does with the rest of the painting. What do you see in the background? What else is in the picture besides the figures from Isaiah? In the corner and off in the background, there are people. It is a depiction of something that happened in Edward Hicks' own history -- it is William Penn, the founder of the Pennsylvania colony, along with some of his associates meeting with a group of native Americans. They are signing a peace treaty, an event that actually did take place.

What is Edward Hicks saying with this painting? He is tying together in a very interesting way this biblical vision of peace with an actual historical instance of that

vision coming into play. He's tying together the metaphor and the reality, demonstrating how this biblical vision of peace is enacted. That is what makes it significant -- that this vision is not just a wonderful picture, something that makes us feel good in our imagination. It is something that actually takes shape in historical circumstances, in our real lives, in our own history.

But notice what is prominent in the painting, What first draws your eye? Your eye is drawn to the vision from Isaiah. What Hicks seems to be saying is that what happens in our lives is just a little piece, one instant, of making this whole vision become enacted. The vision is enacted in many and various ways over time.

This is what the celebration of Advent is about. Today, on the second Sunday of Advent, we celebrate God's promise of peace -- not peace that is a nice thought, but peace that is actually enacted in our own experience. That is what Hicks portrays in his painting -- a vision of peace actually enacted in our own experience.

But the text from Isaiah not only witnesses to God's promise of peace, it also gives us some suggestions about how that peace begins to take shape and become enacted. *Wolves and sheep will live together in peace ...* Think a little bit about wolves and sheep. This is no conflict among peers, is it? This is a one-sided threat of predator to prey. It is not a balanced relationship. What does a wolf have to fear from a sheep?

Many times when we think about peace, we think about people in conflict who just kind of need to get together. They need to compromise, meet halfway. But it going to do the sheep no good to meet the wolf halfway!

Peace for sheep and wolves is a matter of defending the rights of the helpless one -- that's what the text says in Isaiah. A new king will come ... and what will the king do to bring peace? The king will *defend the rights of the helpless* and will *judge the poor fairly*. Peace comes by taking sides ... by taking sides with the weak one, the helpless one. Peace between wolves and sheep will only come by taking the sheep's side. Peace is a matter of doing justice. Peace and justice always go together.

Peace is not simply a matter of calling a truce. You can only keep wolves away from sheep for so long, because it is the wolf's nature to eat sheep. Real peace, then, will only come through transformation, through fundamental change, through a change in nature. The wolf, the lion, the predator simply has to change its diet. And that is what Hicks' painting shows -- a lion eating ... straw! It is a metaphor, but a metaphor that takes shape in concrete ways. The treaty between William Penn and the native Americans is a concrete example. One historian noted that this was *the only treaty between Indians and Christians that was never broken* ... because this was a true meeting.

In order for peace to come, fundamental change needs to happen. Both the predator and the prey -- the wolf and the sheep -- need to change. The predator has to change its diet ... and the prey has to learn to trust. That is what must happen to achieve real peace.

So making peace almost always involves reordering unbalanced relationships. Making peace almost always means making justice. For the strong, the justice of God means judgment. For the strong, the justice of God calls for repentance and conversion and rebirth. And, on the other hand, for the weak, the justice of God means mercy. For the weak, the justice of God means security and new power and new dignity. That is

how peace comes.

This Advent we are focusing on specific ways to make the things we celebrate in Advent real in our lives. Last week we talked about hope, about five ways we could make hope real and give gifts of hope.

Today I want to suggest five specific ways of making peace real, of enacting peace in your life. The first few will be tough, because you will have to identify yourselves first. In order to make peace, you have to figure out if you are a wolf or if you are a sheep, because making peace happens differently for each.

If you are among the strong ... find ways to alter your diet. Find ways to take a "power fast," a fast from power. Let someone else make the decision once. Give away some of your money, because money represents power. Let go of some of your power. Let go of one of your prized goals. Or help someone else achieve one of their goals. If you are a strong person, let go a little bit of your power.

Now if you are among the weak, if you number yourself among the sheep ... do something to build your confidence and make peace happen in that fashion. When someone hurts you, don't hold back the feelings. Speak up! Defend yourself! That will be making peace. Learn a new skill. Feel good about what you can do. Take charge of a project at work or a project at home. Set yourself an ambitious goal and make it happen! If you are one of the sheep, do something to build your confidence and make peace that way.

A third suggestion ... Make peace by contacting someone from whom you have been estranged.

Number four ... Inform yourself about issues of justice and peace. Read *Sojourners*, a magazine that deals with issues of peace and justice from a faith perspective. Or read the United Church of Christ newsletter entitled *Courage in the Struggle for Justice and Peace*. These are two ways to inform yourself about issues of peace and justice.

Or finally, if you have access to the internet, go to the United Church of Christ home page, look under the Peace and Justice section, and there each month you will find a recommended "action of the month," something you can do to make peace happen, to do an act of justice.

These are five ways that we may be peacemakers and enact the peace that God promises. Wolves and sheep will live together in peace -- that's the promise. The promise of Advent is that that day is coming soon!