

November 22, 2015  
First Christian Church Greensboro, NC  
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Psalm 126 and Isaiah 11:1-10  
Thanksgiving Sunday  
*Like Those Who Dream*

It's a compelling image, this wolf and lamb living together in peace, the lion and the calf together, a bear and a cow sharing a field — all these natural enemies existing together, a child playing safely in the middle of what should be dangerous, reaching over the serpents' den... It's a compelling vision: "They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain," says the Lord.

The most famous depiction of this scene was painted by Edward Hicks, who was an American Quaker minister in the 19th century. You've probably seen his work - he called it "The Peaceable Kingdom," and painted this image of a little child, surrounded by the lamb and the lion, the cow and the bear. Over the course of his life, Hicks painted over a hundred different versions of this painting; some 60 or so survive today. Each one is a little different, and changed over the course of his life. Often there's a scene from contemporary events in the background - William Penn making a treaty with the Native Americans, or an episode from his own Quaker tradition - but always there's the lion and the lamb and the child... I find it remarkable to imagine this painter returning again and again to this image that wouldn't let him go.

*The Peaceable Kingdom.* As I was reading about this this week I had to look up the difference between peaceable and peaceful. Why isn't it called the *peaceful* kingdom? Seems pretty peaceful, there, with all those enemies coexisting in peace.

As it turns out, there's a difference. *Peaceful* means tranquil, calm, unruffled. It's a peaceful evening, we might say. Or, the lake looks peaceful in the early morning.

*Peaceable* is slightly different: peaceable means "inclined toward peace." Or able to be peaceful. Inclined toward peace. That's a more complicated word, I think. It's fairly easy to determine if something is peaceful, or not. But how do you know if something is peaceable? Could we be inclined toward peace?

Isaiah - and Edward Hicks after him - imagines a world in which a new sort of king inaugurates a new kind of kingdom, in which these creatures who are normally enemies live together easily. They are inclined toward peace; this is a peaceable world.

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Naomi Shihab Nye is an Arab-American poet - her mother American, her father Palestinian. One of her poems was being passed around this week and caught my attention. Called *Gate A-4*, it

tells of a time she was stuck in an airport, her flight delayed several hours, when she hears an announcement over the loud speaker:

“If anyone in the vicinity of Gate A-4 understands any Arabic, please come to the gate immediately....”

“Well—one pauses these days....”

But she goes, and finds a Palestinian woman who doesn't speak any English, distraught and panicked, afraid that her flight has been cancelled and not just delayed. Naomi, who speaks Arabic and English, helps her understand, calls her son, and calms her down.

In gratitude, the Palestinian woman offers her a cookie, a traditional Palestinian powdered sugar cookie, and then offers one to all the other people who are waiting at the gate, delayed by the airline, stuck together in this place where they would all rather be somewhere else. Soon they were all covered in powdered sugar and sharing cookies and stories. And the poet writes:

“And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and I thought, This is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Not a single person in that gate—once the crying of confusion stopped—seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women, too. This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost.”

The peaceable kingdom: The lion and the lamb together.... they will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.

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Is this just a dream? This vision of this world inclined toward peace? Some far off made up fictional utopia? Is it naive to imagine a world where such things happen?

Is this just a dream?

The writer of Psalm 126 says: *When the lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream...*

The first part of the Psalm is in the past tense - its history, the writer is remembering what has happened in the past. When God did wonderful things for us, we rejoiced.

But then the tense changes, from past to future, and the writer is calling out to God to do the same again — *Restore our fortunes, O Lord... May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.*

Whoever is singing this song here in the present is in the middle of something worthy of tears — remembering what God has done, and praying for the someday when the tears will turn to joy. But right here in the middle, the peaceable kingdom seems like a far-off dream.

Which is a little how the world feels this week, in the wake of the terror in Paris, with threats of terror everywhere, a new reminder that we live in a world where the enemy is not easily identified or seen, where we are fearful all the time.

That peaceable kingdom feels like a far-off dream when we live in such fear, when we can't quite imagine the lion and the lamb living together. When the rhetoric all around us is that of closing in on ourselves, of shutting our borders, of turning away refugees fleeing for their lives...

The world feels un-inclined toward peace.

So let me be clear: I am appalled by the words and actions of our leaders - those who have been elected to represent us and those who would like to be - who have made outrageous statements calling for closing our doors against refugees because they are Syrians or because they are Muslims. I am appalled.

I know that these leaders want to keep us safe. I know that these leaders are afraid.

And I understand fear. I understand the yearning to pull in and protect. Don't think for a minute that I don't want to pull my own children close to me and never let them out into this terrifying world. I understand fear.

But.

For those of us who live in a country founded by people searching for religious freedom, especially for those of us whose ancestors came from Europe and found themselves in a new world...

For those of us who will celebrate Thanksgiving this week and tell that story about the Pilgrims who were welcomed by the native people they met here, who taught them how to grow corn so they could make it through that first harsh winter...

For those of us who tell that story about being welcomed when we were far from home and needing help...

For those of us who follow Jesus, who was always and forever welcoming everybody, who saw past barriers of race and culture and religion all the time, who made it clear that our call was to serve the "least of these..."

For those of us who are Americans and followers of Jesus to default to taking care of our own instead of taking care of the poorest and most vulnerable among us, to default to scarcity and exclusion instead of hospitality and abundance, to default to fear instead of welcome is just about as un-American and as un-Christian as I can imagine.

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Sister Simone Campbell- we talked about her last summer; she's the force behind the Nuns on the Bus movement - she says that what we need in this country is a "theology of insecurity." That what we need is to come to terms with the fact that the world is not safe. That security, as much as we try to put up walls and armor and guard all that we hold dear - is really just an illusion. "We're all vulnerable," she says. Life is vulnerable - dangerous and precious. And what if we made peace with that?

It seems to me that we have a choice, because the reality is that the world is not *peaceful*. There is terror and violence and much to be afraid of. But we have a choice: We can live in fear and close up on ourselves.... or we could decide to be inclined toward peace. We could accept our vulnerability. We could share powdered sugar cookies in crowded airports. We could open our borders and our homes. We could get to know our neighbors. We could dream of a peaceable kingdom.

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Perhaps you saw the interview on a French TV station of a little boy and his father, in Paris, shortly after the attack last week. There was a reporter there with a microphone, but this was a conversation between this father and his young son, kneeling near a makeshift memorial where candles and flowers had been placed to remember those who had died.

Will we have to leave France? The boy asked. No, the father said.

But there's bad guys here, the boy says.  
There are bad guys everywhere, the father says.

They have guns, the boy says.  
Yes, the father says, but we have flowers.

They are here to protect us? The boy says, And the candles, too?  
Yes, says the father.

It is not idealistic or naive to think this way - to place our trust in flowers and candles and powdered sugar cookies and open borders.

It is not naive to dream of a peaceable world.  
In fact, it is an obligation of our faith.

These are not daydreams, but dreams borne of an ancient vision given voice by the poets and the prophets and the children. A vision of a people inclined toward peace.

So I think that when we gather around tables for Thanksgiving feasts this week, when we bring out the best dishes and invite guests and bake meals that take all day to cook... When we gather around tables to share a feast - like the one we'll share downstairs, or the one we'll share here at the communion table in just a moment...

I think we're like Edward Hicks painting that scene over and over again, trying to get it right.

It is practice - these feasts of abundance, for those of us who dream. We do it again and again...  
Not because it's perfect  
Not because the world is peaceful.  
Not because we'll ever get it right  
But because we have hope.

*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.*

Come, people of God: a feast of abundance and grace has been set for you. Come, for all are welcome. Come, for the table is ready.

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