

Strange Peace: *Isaiah 11:1-10*

Norwalk Christian Church, December 4, 2016, Advent 2, Year A

If you didn't get a good look at the painting on the front of the bulletin while Marti was doing the Children's sermon, give it another look. It's just...so...weird, isn't it? Who could make this up? Of course, the artist, Edward Hicks, didn't make it up. He merely illustrated what is right here in our Second Sunday of Advent Scripture Reading. The vision of the Prophet Isaiah. Predators dwelling in harmony with their prey. Lions eating straw like an Ox, instead of eating the Ox! And the most vulnerable humans in society, little baby children, are free to stick their hands in the dens of venomous snakes.

This is strange.

The second Sunday of Advent is, traditionally, the Sunday of peace, where we light the peace candle. *Is this strange picture what peace is to look like?*

Contrast this picture of the future with the futuristic movies so popular in our culture today. Sci-fi once to imagine a peaceful future, the world of Star Trek with peace throughout the federation. Now, it's all doom and gloom. The zombie virus spreads. The band of survivors faces increasing hardship after hardship. The future as we imagine it is bleak and apocalyptic. Climate change causing chaos. Wars and rumors of wars. Death, disease, unknown viruses and invaders.

Where do we get such dark visions of the future? Well, just look around. Things aren't getting better, are they? Watch 24-hour news with a paintbrush in your hand, and your picture will not look like Edward Hick's *The Peaceable Kingdom*.

What's going to happen in the future? I don't know--but it's going to be bad.

More terrorists attacks. Probably World War 3. Nuclear holocaust. It may not be a zombie virus, but it might as well be. This dark, apocalyptic vision of the future--this makes sense. This painting of a Peaceable Kingdom--this is strange.

And then we hear this vision from Isaiah on the second Sunday of Advent. It begins with a tree being cut off. But from that tree, new growth happens. From a time of despair; new life.

The historical situation of the prophet was a time of great upheaval. Judah in the 8th century BCE, when these words were written, was a precarious time. The massive superpower Assyria was wreaking havoc all over the globe. These were the days of a divided kingdom where what we often call "Israel" was, in fact, two different nations: Israel and Judah. And the kingdom of Israel had already fallen, along with other much

larger nations. How long would it be until Isaiah's home, the small nation of Judah with its capital of Jerusalem, also fell to the violent hands of Assyria?

There they stood, at the precipice of a disastrous future. Doom and gloom on the horizon...but the prophet tells a different story.

The prophet talks about the "Spirit of God," but in Hebrew the word for "spirit" is "Ruah", which is the same word as "wind" or "breath." In a time of despair, the breath of God starts blowing. It reminds me of what often happens when the seasons change. There's always a strong wind, isn't there?

The winds blow in fall, and then winter, but after winter, spring and summer. The wind signals things are changing.

The Hebrews had a hard time distinguishing the wind from God's spirit or God's breath. In the beginning, God breathed into humanity, and gave humans life and spirit. And God continues to breath across creation, making things new again.

The people are worried about what future calamity will blow their way, but the prophet talks about the wind of God, blowing in peace--all over the world.

The prophet paints an image of a stump, the remnant of once was, growing a shoot--new life. He calls the "stump" the "stump of Jesse", Jesse being the father of David, Israel's greatest king. From the ruins of this dynasty, something new will come. This shoot is a person: a new king? A prophet? The Messiah? Maybe it's a new people? Maybe it's you or me?

Whatever it is--whoever it is--the prophet tells us that they will see the world with new eyes. "He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear." I love that phrase. "He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear."

No, all evidence--everything you see around you--may point to a future of doom and gloom. But this person sees beyond what her eyes see, the world in a new way.

This person will find hope in the midst of hopelessness. She will look at what's around, stumps, and see new life springing forth. He will see God's Spirit blowing in the wind, and take up the paintbrush, and instead of imagining a future of more death and destruction, she will paint the Peaceable Kingdom, as strange as it may look.

Recently, I read the story of Derek Black. The Washington Post published a story about him on October 15th called "The White Flight of Derek Black", and last week the New York Times published a piece in his own words.

Derek Black is the Godson of David Duke, former imperial wizard of the Klu Klux Klan and still one of America's leading white supremacists. Black's father, Don Black, created the racist website Stormfront, "the Internet's first and largest white nationalist site, with 300,000 users and counting. His mother, Chloe, had once been married to David Duke."

At the age of 10, Derek built a "Stormfront" website for children, to teach kids the beliefs of white nationalism in ways they could understand. Derek and his dad, for years, hosted together the "Don and Derek Black Show", a white nationalists radio show. In 2008 at the age of 19, he received national attention when he won a local election in Palm Beach County, after running a strong racist, white Nationalist campaign. Derek Black was believed to be the future leader of the White Nationalist movement.

And then, Derek went to college at New College in Sarasota. It was a progressive, diverse school, and Derek knew he should keep his white nationalist views to himself. He made friends. He was, pretty much, a normal kid and a good student. But after class, he'd call into his radio show with his Dad and spew his hate over the airwaves.

It was a very duplicitous life, that was eventually going to come out. And soon it did. A fellow student, while researching terrorists groups online, stumbled upon a picture of Derek, and posted it on a student forum. "Derek Black: white supremacist, radio host...[N]ew [C]ollege student???" the post read. 'How do we as a community respond?'"

Over the next few months, Derek experienced a lot of tension at school. Many found it hard to believe that this guy they knew, who had meaningful discussions with people of all races and faith traditions, could be a leader of the white nationalist movement. Some just wrote him off. Many sent hateful messages. But one acquaintance had another idea.

"What are you doing Friday night," he said to Derek in a message. This friend, Matthew Stephenson, was the only Orthodox Jew at New College, and for the last year, had been hosting his own Shabbat/Sabbath dinners in his apartment. He would invite his friends, most of the Christian or Atheist, black or hispanic, serve a traditional Jewish Shabbat meal, say the traditional prayers, and have dinner with his friends.

So this Orthodox Jew invited the young leader of White Supremacy in America to his Shabbat table. And Derek came. "Maybe he never spent time with a Jewish person before," Matthew thought. "Let's treat him like everyone else," he told his other guests. And they did. And Derek kept coming. And over the course of several years, they forged friendships at this table. Derek shared with them his views, and they told him their stories. And soon, Derek began to change.

In Derek's own words, published a week ago, he said, describing these meals: "Through many talks with devoted and diverse people [at my college] — people who chose to invite me into their dorms and conversations rather than ostracize me — I began to realize the damage I had done. Ever since, I have been trying to make up for it."

A white supremacist, sitting down for a Sabbath meal with people of various faiths and races. A white supremacist, changing his mind, renouncing his hateful worldview, being disowned by his family because he is now a voice for inclusion and peace.

It's pretty strange, isn't it? Like Lions grazing with Oxen, strange.

In researching this painting, I learned that it is actually one of 62 surviving paintings, all by the same name and artist. Edward Hicks, born in 1780, painted his first "Peaceable Kingdom" painting in 1833, and kept painting different versions of this scene until he died in 1849. He was painting one for his daughter when he died.

Each one looks very similar, yet each one is different--sometimes in profound ways. Some versions are more peaceful than others. Sometimes the animals lie there together with looks of serenity. Other times, they begin to snarl, raise their claws, threaten to break out of the harmony of the peaceable kingdom. Always in the upper left-hand corner was pictured a modern scene of peace, like the scene in our painting, of Pennsylvanian Quakers signing a treaty of respect and peace with an Indian tribe.

Hicks lived through wars between the United States and multiple native, indigenous tribes, the bloody War of 1812, and the Mexican-American War. His own church tradition, during his lifetime, split after many long years of fighting. Yet, in the midst of all this division and war, Edward Hicks spent his life painting peace.

The prophet says: "*He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear*". It beckons us to ask ourselves, what future do we see? What do we hear?

Maybe things will keep getting worse and worse. Maybe our greatest fears will be realized. Maybe peace is impossible. Maybe a dinner invitation will never change the mind of a white supremacist, and wars will never cease, and hate will win.

Or maybe...maybe a shoot will spring forth from the stump. Maybe the breath of God will blow. Maybe our Advent hope will become a reality.

The season of Advent compels us to see the world with new eyes, eyes that see beyond the surface of things.

"A child shall lead them," the prophet imagines, and his vision became truth. For, it is by the light from that child that we will find our way into this new world springing forth all around us.

A shoot, bursting forth from a stump. The wind of God, blowing in a new world. Can you see it? Can you imagine this strange, new world?

What vision of the world will you spend your life painting?