



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 23 – Proper 28 (C)

The Peaceable Kingdom

[RCL] Isaiah 65:17-25; Canticle 9; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19

Who doesn't love a mountaintop experience? There is something so wonderful and majestic, even holy, about mountains. Scripture is filled with references to mountains and they are often the location for important and holy moments: the Sermon on the Mount, the Mount of Olives, where Jesus prayed before his arrest, Mount Tabor, where the Transfiguration took place, the giving of the 10 Commandments on Mount Sinai, the Mount of Transfiguration, and then the mountain in today's reading from Isaiah, chapter 65, that Isaiah refers to "God's holy mountain." It reads, "Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. The wolf and the lamb shall feed together; the lion shall eat straw like the ox... They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD."

This passage of Hebrew Scripture was written around 745 BC, when Assyria was at war and was attempting to conquer Israel. This was shortly after Israel's own terrible war with Syria. The prophet Isaiah was given a vision of hope for the future, a vision of God's "Peaceable Kingdom." In this kingdom, the king is righteous, just, and merciful, and the result is peace throughout the world. This vision is one that restores God's original intentions and purposes for our world, just as it was in the Garden in Eden before sin and death entered in. It is a world where no one is in danger, where there is no war - only harmony between humans and other humans, between animals and humans, and even between animals and other animals, where literally no one hurts or destroys one another. This is the world, the Kingdom of God, that Isaiah describes as God's will for us, and it is a vision we need to recall and uphold again today.

There is a famous painting by the Quaker Edward Hicks called "The Peaceable Kingdom," based on this vision from Isaiah. In the foreground of the painting are little children, babies, really, playing and petting wild animals: a lion, tiger, leopard, wolf, and bear, right alongside sheep and an ox. These predatory animals are no threat to the other animals or to the children because there is peace and safety between them. In the background of the painting are European settlers talking to and signing a peace treaty with a group of Native Americans. This is Hicks' portrayal of Isaiah's prophetic vision, in which humans make peace with one another and war is ended, where the wolf lies down with the lamb, and an infant plays over the den of venomous snakes. We may shudder at the image of a child playing with or near snakes, and we might find it next to impossible to imagine a truly peaceable kingdom on earth today, because frankly, this world is anything but peaceful and safe. While we might at times have idealized notions of nature and we

may find hints of peace in nature, we know nature is not actually peaceful or harmonious; even a short hike in nature carries with it risks to our safety -we should still bring bear spray and bug repellent.

It is also easy to despair when we observe the way we humans are interacting with one another today. We are witnessing the heartbreak of wars being waged throughout our world right alongside the horrors of escalating political violence in our nation and beyond. We humans continue to hate each other, commit genocide, and exert all kinds of violence and destruction upon one another. It is now to the point that we are no longer surprised to hear of violence or mass shootings, even in our own neighborhoods, because it has become so commonplace, even normalized. We might be tempted to think, “Shouldn’t we just accept it because what can we do?” or, “Isn’t that just our new reality?” or even, “Maybe we need to get used to it and move on.”

But this is precisely when faith is necessary and why we need, desperately, to hear again the prophets and Jesus saying, “No! Don’t stop striving to be peacemakers and to work for God’s peaceable kingdom!” We are called back up to higher ground again and again – back to the holy mountains of God. The stories from Scripture, like Isaiah’s vision, continue to invite us to return to the mountaintop to pray and commune with God in order to seek God’s vision and purpose for us and our world. The Kingdom of Heaven has come near and is already in our midst. We cannot and should not accept this world as it is, and we don’t have to wait for the “end of the world” (as some are prone to predict) in order to start establishing peace. Blessed are the peacemakers! Peace begins with us and is possible because of God’s activity in the world and Jesus’ ministry in our lives. Jesus continues to call us to carry God’s love to the corners of the earth, so we do not and cannot accept the way things are. God has given us a vision of a future filled with hope and peace. So, what are some ways we can make peace here and now to align with God’s Peaceable Kingdom?

First, we can make peace with God. Through prayer, God is able to assist us if something is preventing us from having peace in that relationship, whether it’s because we’re angry at God, need to experience a renewal of faith, or need to receive or extend forgiveness. Second, we can make peace with ourselves. Is there anything keeping you from having peace within yourself? Perhaps you haven’t forgiven yourself for something or are still holding on to frustration or shame? If so, make peace by forgiving yourself today and accepting God’s loving forgiveness for you. See yourself through God’s loving eyes and know that there is no condemnation for those in Christ. Third, we can make peace with others, particularly those with whom we disagree, those we have been hurt by, and those whom we have hurt. Is there someone you need to make peace with in your life? A friend, family member, or even group of people? Take steps to move toward forgiveness; embrace peace and reconciliation with them with God’s help. Fourth, we can make peace with God’s creation – from the animals to the oceans to the skies and all the flora and fauna of God’s earth. We can take up peaceable practices that refrain from further destruction and harm toward the earth and the creatures of God– from what we choose to eat to what we wear to what we drive. Our everyday choices can move us toward the Peaceable Kingdom.

When we make peace with God, with ourselves, with others, and with God's creation, we are better able to extend that peace to the wider world. As followers of Jesus, we have been commissioned to bring the peace of the Lord and to help make the Peaceable Kingdom a reality in our lives and corner of the world. While the fullness of God's Peaceable Kingdom will not be *fully* realized until later, we *can* make and know peace today, right here, right now. Making peace is the ultimate mountaintop experience. And together, as the church, we can inspire and give the world a renewed vision of God's Peaceable Kingdom on earth! Thanks be to God.

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