

“Before and After: Far Off and Near By”  
Ephesians 2:11-22/Isaiah 11:1-9/Matthew 28:16-20  
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I. Introduction

He was a painter. He was also known as a preacher in the Quaker denomination, which didn't really emphasize preaching. But he would be remembered as a painter.

The painter's name was Edward Hicks. Since boyhood he had decorated signs, milk cans, rugs and barn boards. Now that he was older he painted canvasses.....and his artistic imagination was fixed on one vision. He called it The Peaceable Kingdom. The inspiration for Hick's vision came from Isaiah's vision; the allegory in Isaiah 11:6: *“The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion together, and a little child shall lead them.”* It is a great vision of peace. And Hicks turned out painting after painting with this vision of God's hope.....sometimes even on milk cans, rugs and barn boards. Perhaps you have seen one of these pictures.

Edward Hicks began painting in the early 19<sup>th</sup> C, and at that time many people believed the United States could be a place of peace and justice. They had hope for just relationships between Indians and colonists. They had hope for the end of slavery. They had hope that immigrants would cross the sea, leave the prejudices of “the old world,” and discover something new in America.

The Peaceable Kingdom.....Hick's paintings hang in many galleries. They are reminders of the plan of God.....and the vision of Isaiah. They are reminders of the hope of the Quakers.....the hope of a young country.....and the hope of Edward Hicks. I suppose The Peaceable Kingdom is our hope, too.....what we mean by the coming kingdom of God.....what we pray; “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

II. Exegesis

The great vision of Isaiah begins with the Messiah; the anointed One of God. He would come from the lineage of King David; the ideal king reigning with wisdom and justice. The Messiah would bring The Peaceable Kingdom, bringing a type of paradise regained.....the new kingdom of God.

The vision sleeps for generations. But then there comes One from the lineage of king David. He talks of a new kingdom, God's kingdom, a way of wisdom and justice. He gathers a “ragtag” bunch of people, and they live together in a new kind of peace. The anointed One is Jesus Christ, and in his life, death and resurrection the vision of Isaiah awakens. After his resurrection he commands his followers, “Go and make

disciples of all nations.....all nations.” Wow.....all nations are to have one name; followers of Jesus Christ. The old prejudices, hatreds, labels and divisions are to end. It’s the dawning of the new creation; wolf and lamb, leopard and kid, calf and lion, and a little child.....it’s The Peaceable Kingdom.

The awakening vision of Isaiah for “all nations,” The Peaceable Kingdom, is to be the life and witness of the church. In this fading old world we are to bear witness to the coming new age. That’s the point of our text from Ephesians 2:11-22 this morning.

**Read Ephesians 2:11-12.** There was a time when not everyone was part of the picture.....a time when it was anything but peaceful. As the plan of God for the world moved forward there was a time when Gentiles were far away from God. There was a time we were without a Lord and Savior, outsiders to God’s people Israel, strangers to the promises of God, without hope, and without a relationship to the true God. Our Gentile ancestors believed in gods, but did not know the true God. There was a time when we Gentiles were not part of the picture.....far away from The Peaceable Kingdom. But all that changed with Jesus Christ.

**Read Ephesians 2:13-18.** Through the cross of Jesus Christ the old distinctions between Jew and Gentile don’t divide anymore (nor do the more recent distinctions of Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Assembly of God, or traditional, contemporary, postmodern, missional, emergent or purpose driven). The names describe traditions, histories and theologies, but they are all part of one Church. There is one Christ, and what matters is the one confession that He is Lord. There is one people of God, one Church in the world, one body of Christ, and one head of the Church, Jesus Christ. There are different instruments in the symphony, but only one orchestra. Jesus Christ is the peace between all.

And Jesus Christ brings peace between God and human community. In Jesus Christ all of creation is reconciled to God. In Jesus Christ God descends to creation, and creation is taken up into God. In Jesus Christ the guilt of sin and the power of death are defeated, and we received the eternal promises of God for us. We are now part of the picture.....part of The Peaceable Kingdom. We were once “far away.” But now we are “near by” other followers of Jesus Christ, and “near by” the glory of God.

**Read Ephesians 2:19-22.** As this section draws to a close, the writer has in mind a new temple. The old temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Romans in 70CE. It had been a holy place, but also a place of division and conflict; Jews separated from Gentiles, men from women, and priests from the laity. Many were strangers and aliens to each other, and to God.

But the new temple is not like that. It too is a holy place, but it is not a building. It is the community of followers of Jesus Christ. The whole world is invited to follow Jesus as Lord, and the old divisions of Jew and Gentile, men and women, priest and laity fall away. This church is built upon the power and grace of God in Jesus Christ, and participants in the church follow the way of Jesus Christ. It is a holy place, and through the Holy Spirit God dwells in this new temple called the Church.....a sign of the coming new creation of God for the world.....The Peaceable Kingdom.

### III. Application

The Church is not a building, nor is it a “super-mart” to meet our needs. Rather it is a community of followers of Jesus Christ, who, in their way of life and life together, bear witness to the coming reign of God.....and in that life together God is present. When we are at our best people catch glimpses of the new heaven and the new earth.

But that new creation.....that Peaceable Kingdom, comes only small steps. In 1827 Edward Hicks’ own Quaker denomination split over a conflict. The schism broke his heart. For the next 20 years, until his death, he continued to paint The Peaceable Kingdom. It became a sermon, a greater vision, of what the Church is to be.....a hope for the future.

Young America would then move West and overrun the Native Americans, motivated by a vision other than peace and God’s kingdom. Immigrants would continue to come to these shores, many bringing the prejudices from the old world. It would take the Civil War to free African Americans, and we’re still living with the legacy of racism that sought to justify slavery. The Peaceable Kingdom seems very far off.

Small steps.....but the kingdom does come. And it comes, sometimes, in surprising places. This past Tuesday morning I was reading in Mrs. Romo’s 1<sup>st</sup> grade class at Case Elementary. It was the Tuesday after Martin Luther King Day, so I was not surprised that the book was on Martin Luther King, Jr. Before I started to read I asked the class what they knew about MLK? A few kids raised their hands, mostly the African-American students. I then read the book, and one page read a line from MLK’s “I Have a Dream” speech:

“I have a dream that one day my four little children will live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”

I stopped reading, and we talked about what that means. I then said, “Look around....look at each other. You’re doing it.” And the African American, white and Hispanic kids looked around, and were pleased. It is small steps in the kingdom.

About three weeks ago I was at the Presbytery Office talking with Executive Presbyter Dave Dawson. We talked about the change and challenge in our area due to demographic changes, socio-economic changes, generational changes, and the economy. The result has been a significant decline in worship attendance, membership and money. And that, in turn, has created anxiety, fear and “finger pointing.” The Presbytery’s Committee on Ministry is very busy dealing with conflict in many Presbyterian churches. Dave asked me, “What should we do?” I said, “What can we really do about those large cultural shifts? Not much. But we can do something about how we respond.....we can do something about how we act in this time of testing. We can be more like the dawning new kingdom of God, and less like the fading age of this world. We can deal with difficult things as followers of Jesus Christ.

The Sunday after that discussion with Dave Dawson was Epiphany Sunday. And as is our recent practice Epiphany stars were handed out. In past years the stars contained a variety of words; strength, hope, journey, patience. But this year they all contained the same word. Do you remember what that word was? It was unity. I had not planned that (and in fact had nothing to do with that), but there it was; a time of challenge and conflict, and the word “unity” on Epiphany Sunday. Perhaps that’s just a strange coincidence.....or perhaps it’s a whisper of God that The Peaceable Kingdom might draw near. Perhaps.....