

Uncanny Peace

Isaiah 11:1-10

Farmville Baptist Church

December 4, 2022

If there is one thing I am praying for this year, it is peace.

We seem to be in a world that is not the most peace-filled.

Our newsfeeds and nightly news programs still touch on the conflict raging in Ukraine, where men and women, boys and girls still die from bullets and explosions while even more men and women, boys and girls, face hunger, disease, dislocation, and the fear of uncertainty while fleeing from tanks, troops, and drones. Ukraine is not alone in being a place where peace is hard to come by; conflicts continue, both hot and cold, around the world, with real people with names and faces and families behind the numbers we may hear about or read in the papers. The horror of gun violence

continues in our schools, in our stores, in our houses of worship, and in our homes with no end in sight. And the tragedy of partner abuse, child abuse, sexual exploitation, and mental intimidation rages throughout human society.

In such a world, peace is elusive. It is uncertain. It is, far too often, fleeting. And it is incomplete.

So when we turn to our passage from the prophet Isaiah today, we might just find that the portrait of peace he offers is a bit...uncanny.

Now, uncanny isn't a word we use all that often in daily life. In fact, growing up, the only use of "uncanny" I can remember on anything like a regular basis was on the comic books at the mall. Among the Amazing Spider-Man and Incredible Hulk titles was the original, and still running, iteration of Marvel's mutant superhero team, the Uncanny X-Men. They were good-guy superheroes, by and large, who

protected the innocent and used their amazing powers to help the world – and yet they made lots of people in the comics uncomfortable and suspicious. Why? Because they were different, mysterious, and vaguely unsettling. One comics website says of the X-Men,

“The X-Men were, of course, called ‘uncanny’ because of their very nature. As mutants, the X-Men came in all shapes and sizes, which was certainly something that puzzled people, both in-universe and outside of the stories. They were, of course, popular but that never really meant that they stopped being mysterious or, at times, even eerie.”¹

And, as I think back on flipping through those comic books while my parents shopped, I think that’s a pretty good description: the mutant-heroes on the pages were odd, strange, unsettling, mysterious, and even though I cheered for them in their adventures, I never quite felt comfortable

¹ <https://retrogeekery.com/why-are-the-x-men-called-uncanny-in-the-comics/>

with these characters. They were too far outside of my own experience. They were uncanny.

Something similar happens when we read what Isaiah proclaimed over 2500 years ago. Our passage today paints a picture of what Isaiah and many faithful Jews hoped would one day happen: that God would renew the kingship of his people with a righteous descendent of David, and that this would usher in a harmonious golden era when peace reigns and things would go back to how God desired it to be. It's a portrait that brought great hope to Isaiah's readers, and it's a portrait that has inspired Jews and Christians for millennia. But to be honest, both parts of this passage seem a bit...uncanny...to me.

Let's start with the first part of the passage, the description of the hoped-for king. Isaiah begins by saying that this king will be unlooked-for, "a shoot...from the stump

of Jesse.” Descended from David, Jesse’s son, this future king will nonetheless come as a surprise, when the dynasty has ended and all hope has been lost. Where the kings of Judah had descended in line from David, through Solomon and all the way to Ahaz and his son Hezekiah, the kings when Isaiah wrote, the prophet knew that line would fail. Even the best among them were not fully capable of carrying out their responsibilities to God’s people and ruling in line with the ways of God – and there weren’t that many “best” among them. Most of the kings of Judah were unfaithful to God and unsuccessful as Judah’s rulers. The line of kings will be broken – and, Isaiah might say, for good reason!

But this isn’t another king in the same line. This is a new shoot, a new branch. This king will have the spirit of the Lord rest on him, a spirit of wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and fear of the Lord –

something that hasn't happened in Isaiah's time, nor even in Judah's memory since the time of David. This is a faithful ruler, faithful to God and faithful to God's people. He is committed to the way of God and concerned with the righteous and just and equitable life that God wants his people to live. One commentator, describing this hoped-for king, says,

“Verses 2-5 paint a powerful portrait of one to come in the line of David who is empowered by God's spirit, equipped with the qualities of covenant commitment, and directed to the welfare of the most defenseless and marginal. This is a model of hoped-for leadership in any generation.”²

Such a king would be a blessing to his people, and would embody the life God intends. Isaiah just hadn't seen him arrive.

² Bruce Birch, *Feasting on the Word*, 29 and 31.

To be honest, we probably haven't, either, at least not among our earthly rulers. Regardless of our political preferences or commitments, we likely cannot point to leaders at any level of society who fit this description of the sort of leadership that fulfills the model Isaiah lays out. There is a selflessness here, a humility matched with a supreme confidence to carry forward the rule of God's people that, frankly, most humans simply don't match. But this sort of leader – who wouldn't want to live in a society led by such a person? Well, according to this, maybe not the rich or the greedy or the powerful – but most people in most of history, including when Isaiah was writing, weren't rich or powerful. They were the meek of the earth, the poor who suffer at the hands of the unjust powers that be. This king would rule with concern for these people, the folks left out of the councils and halls of power, the human beings often

trampled on or ignored by normal kings – and Isaiah says the reign of such a king is consistent with righteousness, equity, and faithfulness. This is the sort of rule that is in line with the concerns of God, Isaiah says.

To us, as to those in Isaiah's time and in all of human history in between, such a king would have seemed odd, weird – uncanny. Long experience has left most of us cynical when it comes to the motives of those who run the country, the state, even the county or town. And that is no more true for us than it was for subjects of the Crown in the colonial period, peasants on a fief during the feudal period, citizens of Rome under the Caesars...or even the people of Israel and Judah under the kings of the Old Testament. But Isaiah longed for such a king – and about 700 years later, some of the followers of a rabbi from Galilee thought that this king had finally appeared. One scholar sums up that “early

Christians saw [Isaiah's prophecy] completely fulfilled in Jesus."³ The king who rules with righteousness and faithfulness, who seeks equity and embodies the spirit of God that rests upon his shoulders, is real and alive and present – even if he is a bit uncanny for us whose experience has never included such a ruler before.

Since the ruler Isaiah envisioned, the ruler Christians came to understand as Jesus, is so strange when viewed through an earthly lens, perhaps it shouldn't surprise us that the kingdom he rules, and the peace that kingdom is marked by, is uncanny as well. This came home for me this week as I thought about a famous series of paintings of the second half of our Isaiah passage today, *Peaceable Kingdom*. You've probably seen them before. Quaker minister and artist Edward Hicks was captivated by the imagery of the prophet.

³ Birch, 31

Indeed, he was so captivated by it that he painted 62 different variations of Isaiah's peaceable kingdom! And, I've got to tell you – they are kind of weird to me. All of them that I've seen have animals with kind of creepy eyes. But perhaps even more uncanny is the juxtaposition of predator and prey, hunter and hunted, dangerous killer and desperate flee-er. Right in the mix is a young, small, innocent-looking child – sometimes two. There's just something about it all that is mysterious, strange, not quite right. Or, rather, not quite realistic – because in our world, that isn't the way life goes.

But there's a part of us that wants it to go that way. Think about if you have ever watched a news story of a tiger and an orangutan becoming unlikely friends or clicked on a YouTube video about a cat and a fox playing together; doesn't it just make you feel happier? It seems odd – but it

also seems like a world we would want to live in, a world where these odd pals could find common ground instead of squaring off in the circle of life.

One commentator suggests, “Our fascination with such oddities surely has to do with more than our love of the cute and fascination with the bizarre. We recognize something profound in these reports. They signify hope. If even animals can override bloody instinct, how might we humans do the same?”⁴

The answer is, we cannot – at least, not on any large scale. And the animals can’t, either. The human experience of the world is that wolves eat lambs, leopards devour goats, calves are threatened by lions, and small children can die when bitten by a cobra or viper. And that same human experience will teach us, with depressing certainty, that

⁴ Stacy Simpson Duke, *Feasting on the Word*, 26

peace between nations, within communities, and even among friends and family will be fleeting, because people are always susceptible to greed, or envy, or lust, or jealousy, or pride, or the desire to dominate and control. In short, people are tempted to commit acts that exploit or harm or take advantage of others, something the Bible calls sin. And sinful people – well, the sins we commit stand in the way of peace whenever it is left up to us.

This is something that the Reverend Hicks learned as he pastored and served and experienced humanity right up close. In his many paintings of the Peaceable Kingdom, animals are there, and a child or two, and often, in the background, a delegation of Quakers in peaceful conversation with a group of Native Americans. But “over time, the paintings changed. Hicks grew increasingly discouraged by the conflicts of his time, especially within his

religious community, and began to make the predators in his paintings more terribly ferocious.”⁵ As the predators grow more ferocious-looking, the paintings start to make more sense – that’s the world we recognize, the world Hicks experienced.

And yet, the uncanniness endures – because the little child remained. Hicks maintained his hope that another way, a better way, a more uncanny way, was possible – because he knew that the uncanny peace Isaiah saw, the uncanny peace of God that generations of God’s people have hoped for and prayed for, could happen through something beyond human effort and experience. It could come about – indeed, it could *only* come about – through the arrival of a king like Isaiah saw in the first part of his vision. A king who would watch out for the needs of the poor and the

⁵ Paul Duke, *Feasting on the Word*, 29 and 31

victimized? A king who would judge with true fairness and equity, and not with partiality or skewed vision? A king who would literally embody the Spirit of the Lord – a spirit of wisdom and understanding, of counsel and strength, of knowledge and fear of the Lord? That sort of king would make true peace, one beyond our comprehension, possible. That sort of king will bring about God’s uncanny peace, and make that sort of kingdom possible for all the children of God.

So this Advent season, as we look forward to the celebration of the coming of Jesus in Bethlehem, my prayer is that the Prince of Peace who came 2000 years ago will also reveal himself in your life and in our world. May this Advent be the year that you find your life filled with the wisdom and understanding of God as you face life’s trials. May this be the Advent that you discover that Jesus is *for* you, and *for* us all,

no matter how insignificant or powerless we may feel. And, on a broader scale, may this be the Advent that wars will cease and bloodshed will be stemmed, that the abused will be protected and abusers will be stopped in their tracks, that the poor and the victims of this world will find equity and protection while the wicked are held to just account. And may this be the Advent when we seek and help bring about God's peace. It's a peace that may be a bit unsettling because it is so uncanny, but it's the peace that we desperately need and our world desperately needs, because it's the peace that will be the end of hurt and destruction and replace it with the knowledge of the Lord and the glory of God. May this Advent be an Advent of peace.