

# **THE PEACEABLE KINGDOM**

**Isaiah 11:1-10**  
**Romans 15:4-7, 13**

*The Advent vision of peace  
runs counter to our culture.*

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The undercurrent has been flowing for some time. Fifty-three years ago, *A Charlie Brown Christmas* was first broadcast. The message behind the cuteness was the commercialization of Christmas, from Snoopy's decorated dog house to an irritable Christmas play director named Lucy, until Linus stepped into the spotlight and recited the Christmas story from the Gospel of Luke. "That's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown."<sup>1</sup> The disconnect between our cultural Christmas and the real meaning of Christmas is not new.

In 2006, some pastors got together and started what they called the "Advent Conspiracy." They created a study that challenged people to make their Advent celebrations more Christ-like by practicing four principles: Worship Fully, Spend Less, Give More, Love All.<sup>2</sup> In their first year, they raised half a million dollars for 14 water wells in Africa. Some of you may have done the Advent Conspiracy study here. Their video is a sermon in itself: (Advent Conspiracy video)

This is all good stuff. But isn't it ironic that to be faithful to the Biblical story of Advent and Christmas, we have to form a countercultural movement? Theologian A. W. Tozer said, "Christ came to bring peace, and we celebrate his coming by making peace impossible for six weeks of each year . . . . He came to help the poor, and we heap gifts upon those who do not need them."<sup>3</sup>

I am not against the traditions of the holiday season—gift-giving, decorations, parties, Santa Claus, carol-singing. That's all fine, done in moderation and with the understanding that everything we do during Advent and Christmas is focused on the coming birth of Jesus. Without Christ, there is no Christmas.

In fact, if you can read the story of Christmas without the cultural blinders on, the birth of Jesus is a countercultural story. The Son of God did not come in splendor, but in poverty. Joseph and Mary were working-class if not poor people. Nazareth and Bethlehem were both out-of-the-way places, far from the halls of power and influence. Everything that happened leading up to and including the birth of Jesus

turned the tables on the conventional understanding of the coming of the Messiah.

But everything that happened was based on a Biblical vision. It grew out of the prophecies that had been spoken centuries before by men like Isaiah. Isaiah's ministry took place in the last 40 years of the eighth century BCE. There were still two kingdoms, Israel and Judah, but the threat of destruction from the new Assyrian empire was looming over the land. Israel was under pressure from surrounding kingdoms to join an alliance against Assyria, and then the northern kingdom of Israel was destroyed by Assyria. It was a troubled, violent, chaotic time.

In the midst of the chaos, Isaiah proclaimed a vision of peace—the Peaceable Kingdom, as it is often called. Isaiah foretold a day when a new leader would come from the family of Jesse—a shoot out of his stump. Jesse was the father of David, the greatest king ever. The dynasty of King David had been cut off, but a new branch would grow out of the stump. A new king would come from that lineage.

The character of the new leader would be clear: *“The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.”*<sup>4</sup> His concern will be for the poor and meek, and he shall wear righteousness and faithfulness like a garment.

Then Isaiah gives this famous picture of the Peaceable Kingdom of God, where all enemies live in peace together: *“The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. 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.”*<sup>5</sup> Even natural enemies will get along in God's peaceable kingdom, much less the human enemies we make.

How and when will this happen? When the earth is full of the knowledge of the Lord. When everyone turns to God and seeks God's salvation. We're still waiting for that day.

Paul echoes this vision of universal harmony in the Letter to the Romans: "*May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.*"<sup>6</sup>

This is the vision that gives us hope and peace. Paul said, "*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*"<sup>7</sup> Or as Jesus said it, "*Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.*"<sup>8</sup> I don't know if I could find any more comforting words in all of Scripture.

This Biblical vision of peace is countercultural. Peace is not the way of the world. We look around; we see no peace. Our nation has soldiers all over the world, and other nations of the world are at war. There are over 40 armed conflicts worldwide in 2018 that have caused more than 100 fatalities in the last 12 months. There is discord and strife in our government. There is controversy everywhere you turn—in our communities, in our churches, in our families, even within our own hearts.

Edward Hicks was a Quaker minister who lived in Bucks County, PA, in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He was also a painter. In addition to artistic pictures, he painted barns, farm equipment, tavern signs, whatever he could to make a living. He was good at what he did, so people hired him, and he began to make a decent, even prosperous, living at his painting.

This did not set well with his Quaker congregation, who were dedicated to living frugally and simply. In fact, Hicks' prosperity caused a church split, and Quakers aren't normally fighters. Hicks quit

painting and tried to farm, but he was not very good at farming. Eventually he left the ministry and just concentrated on painting.

Hicks' most famous painting by far is a portrayal of Isaiah's vision of peace. Perhaps because of his own experience, and because of the growing tensions in the United States over slavery, he painted over 100 versions of this scene. Quakers were famous for non-violence and for their opposition to slavery. Along with the wolf and lamb and other animals and the child, you can see in the background Quaker William Penn making a treaty with the Native Americans of Pennsylvania.<sup>9</sup>

This is the Advent vision, the peaceable kingdom of God, where enemies can be reconciled and live in peace. So how do we find the kind of peace that Isaiah and Paul and Jesus talked about? Beatle John Lennon used to sing, "We're only trying to get us some peace."<sup>10</sup> How can we get us some peace this Christmas?

Here's a countercultural strategy: **REST**. You're thinking, "Yeah, right, have you seen my to-do list?" Still, I am telling you, if you want peace, you have to be peaceful, at least some of the time.

There are two ways to rest. One is to get enough sleep. Sleep is often a rare commodity this time of year. One of the local TV stations carried a story this week about health studies that were being done on the amount of sleep people get. Lack of sleep can cause several different kinds of health problems. In particular, "night owls," those who stay up late, were 10% more likely to die during the 6-year course of the study than the "larks" or early risers.<sup>11</sup>

So first, to get peace, get enough sleep. Second, get enough prayer. Rest in God. Carve out some time to be still with God. Don't skip your prayer time during the holidays; increase it. You need it more now than ever.

If you want peace this Christmas, do something besides run 90 miles an hour the whole season. Stop. Slow down. Take a deep breath. Rest. Center your soul on Jesus. Spend some time in conversation with your God. And peace will be with you.

The second countercultural thing you can do to find peace this Christmas is to **RENEW**. This is a most wonderful time to renew your faith, to start over again in a deep commitment to your Lord. It's a great time to fall in love again with Jesus. Renewal has a lot to do with repentance. Advent was originally conceived as a "little Lent," a time of prayer and repentance to prepare us for Christmas, the same way Lent prepares us for Easter. Before we can move ahead into a new future, we have to repent of the wrongs we have done in the past.

One of the characters who always makes an appearance on the Advent stage is John the Baptist. Preaching and baptizing in the wilderness, he was as counter to the culture as they come. Dressed in camel's hair and eating off the land in the Judean desert, he called the people to repentance. And he wasn't very nice about it: "*You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*"<sup>12</sup>

This is serious business. You cannot have peace when the turmoil of sin lives inside of you. We need to get renewed. Then we can get us some peace.

We can find peace when we rest and renew, but ultimately we have to **RESPOND** to Christ. We won't find peace if we never put our lives into service of the Kingdom. We have to put our faith into action. There are many ways to respond to Christ at Christmas time. There are ample opportunities to raise money for the needy, to feed the hungry, to buy toys for the disadvantaged. Lots of good works get done during the holidays.

However, our God is a 24/7, year-round, day in and day out kind of a God. One of the songs from the Charlie Brown Christmas special has the lyric, "Christmas time is here ... Oh, that we could always see such spirit through the year."<sup>13</sup> There are opportunities to serve God even

after the holidays are past. You can serve God in the church; you can serve God in the community; you can serve God in your own home. However you respond, it will bring you peace, because you know you are doing something important and meaningful for the Kingdom.

My hope for you is that, whatever life is throwing at you right now, this Christmas you will know peace. Leigh C. Bishop is a psychiatrist and military reservist who was stationed at Bagram Airfield in Afghanistan on Christmas Eve 2008. In the dim light of dusk, he watched as a procession of military vehicles approached the airfield, came to a stop, and carefully unloaded a flag-draped steel casket. He knew that somewhere in the U.S., a family was going to suffer a Christmas homecoming that no one wanted. It was a heartbreaking scene for Bishop to take in—and one all too familiar in war.

As Bishop walked away from the sad air field, he became aware of other things going on in the camp. Soldiers were holding candles and belting out Christmas carols. In front of the auditorium, luminaries lined the path to a Christmas concert. At the base chapel, people were filing in for a Christmas Eve worship service. Bishop wrote:

Jesus did not come just to provide an occasion to sing carols, drink toasts, feast, and exchange gifts. But we are right to do these things, even as soldiers die and families grieve, because he came. And in his coming, he brought joy and peace—the joy that overcomes our sorrows, and the only kind of peace that ultimately matters. It's the peace of which the end of all wars, terrible as they are, is merely one token. It's the peace that means the long war between the heart and its Maker is over. It's a peace treaty offered in Bethlehem and signed, in blood, on Calvary.

So joy to the world, and to every celebrating or grieving or hurting soul in it. The Lord has come. Let heaven and nature—and even those who stand watch with lighted candles in the land of the shadow of death—sing.<sup>14</sup>

Even in the midst of war, chaos, conflict, suffering, sadness, grief, or loneliness, we can find peace. It's countercultural, unexpected, even surprising. Maybe we had better pay attention. To quote the late Father Henri Nouwen, "The small child of Bethlehem, the unknown man of Nazareth, the rejected preacher, the naked man on the cross, he asks for my full attention. The work of salvation takes place in the midst of a world that continues to shout, scream and overwhelm us with its claims and promises. But the promise is hidden in the shoot that sprouts from the stump, a shoot that hardly anyone notices."<sup>15</sup>

Notice how countercultural the real Christmas story is. Notice the vision God gives us of a peaceable Kingdom. Notice that all our hopes and dreams are fulfilled in the Baby born in Bethlehem. Then you will find peace. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vVp5AGte\\_4Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vVp5AGte_4Q).

<sup>2</sup> "Advent Conspiracy," *Wikipedia.com*. <https://youtu.be/2yfnlhvnr-k>.

<sup>3</sup> A.W. Tozer, *The Warfare of the Spirit* (Wingspread Publishers, 1993)

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 11:2.

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 11:6-9.

<sup>6</sup> Romans 15:5-6.

<sup>7</sup> Romans 15:13.

<sup>8</sup> John 14:27.

<sup>9</sup> Ken Carter, "Christmas Greetings from Bishop Carter and the Council of Bishops," <http://www.umc.org/who-we-are/christmas-greetings-from-bishop-carter-and-the-council-of-bishops>.

<sup>10</sup> John Lennon, "The Ballad of John and Yoko," Apple Music, 1969.

<sup>11</sup> <https://5newsonline.com/2018/04/12/bad-news-for-night-owls-late-risers-may-die-sooner/>.

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 3:7-10.

<sup>13</sup> Lee Mendelson and Vince Guaraldi, "Christmas Time Is Here," Lee Mendelson Film Productions, 1965.

<sup>14</sup> Leigh C. Bishop, "Christmas in Afghanistan," *Christianity Today* (December 2009), pp. 36-37.

<sup>15</sup> Henri Nouwen, from *Gracias; A Latin American Journal*, reprinted in *The Lord Is Near*, Creative Communications, 2011, p. 4.