

Welcome

[Image] One of the most famous American paintings is this from Edward Hicks. It's part of a series of 61 such paintings he did in a series called *Peaceable Kingdom*. This particular painting is the most famous of his collection.

In the foreground, we see an impossible scene - predators and prey just sort of hanging out together. We've got a lion, a tiger, a leopard, a wolf, a bear, some sort of werewolf creature there. And they're all looking very surprised next to a bull, ox, calf, goat and sheep. And playing with them are some cherubic little children, who seem utterly unconcerned to be in the presence of so many big, dangerous animals.

This is obviously a fictitious scene, and it's one that's meant to comment on the scene in the background. That is a historical event, one that took place 140 years before Hicks painted this work.

It depicts the signing of a treaty between Tammany, the leader of the Lenni Lenape nation and one William Penn, who founded the British colony of Pennsylvania. We don't have any surviving copies of the treaty, but scholars believe it was signed (or agreed upon if it wasn't on paper) in 1682.

William Penn was a Quaker, a strand of Christianity committed to, among other things, direct, personal experience of God and peace-making.

Unlike other British colonists, Penn refused to wage war against Indigenous nations to acquire land. He engaged with Indigenous nations like the Lenape the same as he did with other Europeans (a radical idea - to treat the Lenape as people, not savage sub-humans).

This treaty was one example of that - Penn insisted on buying land from the Lenape at a fair price. The Quakers engaged in mission work that looked much more like the Pilgrimage model we explored a couple of weeks ago than the violent conquest that characterized much of the rest of European colonization of the Americas.

No wonder, then, Hicks chose to paint these two scenes next to each other. He painted this scene at a time when the relationship between the US and Native nations was worsening. We were less than a decade from Andrew Jackson's genocidal presidency and the infamous Trail of Tears. A generation of Americans had pressed into the newly purchased Louisiana Territory, bringing new conflicts with even more native nations.

It's fair to ask which of these scenes would have been *less* believable for Hicks - that of predator and prey living in harmony or Europeans treating Native nations with dignity and respect.

But keep in mind, Hicks was depicting a scene that wasn't impossible - Penn had demonstrated it was possible for a European to do just that - live in peace and harmony, in mutual respect with Native nations.

If the US had adopted Penn's attitude toward Native nations, rather than that of Jackson and his kind, we would have avoided innumerable atrocities carried out in the name of the Monroe Doctrine and Westward Expansion.

So Hicks' painting is one of hope. It's grounded in historical reality and also an act of imagination. A desire to see a better world, one that he doesn't see around him.

We're going to explore that hope today. Because Hicks' painting is grounded in the words of the prophet Isaiah, another person who offered images of hope in impossible times.

Today, we're going to exercise our imaginations together. We're going to practice hoping.

Message

This is the second week of Advent. Christians all over the world are spending the four weeks of Advent preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus. Advent is a season of hopeful imagination. We look forward to the return of Jesus by putting ourselves in the place of God's people as they waited for the birth of the Messiah.

This year, our Advent series is called Christmas is for Dreamers. We're exploring the words of the prophet Isaiah, one of the first of God's prophets to look for a savior to rescue us.

Last week, we began by asking how we know if we're wanting the right things. Tim challenged us with a dream from the prophet Isaiah where God's people want justice for all, peace for the whole world.

Today, we are reflecting on the nature of hope. Hope is the stubborn insistence that the way things are isn't the way things are always going to be.

"The way things are" is an appropriately vague phrase. It can be about big things, like Hicks' picture contrasting with the legacy of the US' genocidal policy toward Native American nations. Or the continuing injustices and inequalities faced by Black Americans, or the kids incarcerated unjustly at our Southern border. It can be economic concerns about our disappearing middle class, and how much more difficult it seems to be to make ends meet for ordinary folks today. Or maybe it's that feeling of being *always on*, of having schedules with no margin and bank accounts with no margins and debt with way too much margin.

Or, since we're smack dab in the middle of the holiday season, "the way things are" could be relational. Maybe this is the last Christmas you'll spend with someone. Or maybe that was last year, and you're grieving in a new way this year. Maybe you are avoiding family, or what 'family' looks like has changed since last year.

Or maybe you just don't understand why everyone seems angry, hurt or scared all the time. It doesn't impact you personally, but you can tell people you love aren't okay.

Hope is the insistence that these ways things are aren't how they'll always be.

Hope insists a brighter day is on the horizon. Or, maybe, just over the horizon, its light not quite visible to our eyes.

Hope, then, is by definition an act of imagination. Hope refuses to say, "It is what it is," but hope also isn't passive. It can feel that way - as though we're just burying our heads in the sand and offering weak-willed, empty promises that maybe things might turn around.

This is why we need Advent. We need to remember how God has been faithful to God's promises in the past. God's past faithfulness shapes our present hopes.

[**Scripture Slide**] Turn with me to Isaiah 11. This is a prophecy Isaiah delivered in a time the nation of Judah felt hopeless, around 733 BCE. The ruling king was a man named Ahaz, and like most of Judah's kings, he was caught in a complicated web of international politics. To the north and east, the most powerful empire of the day, Assyria, was expanding, gobbling up nation after nation, including Israel. Judah was defenseless, with a giant, hungry empire at their borders. But God was faithful to Judah. In the previous chapter, Isaiah imagines God's coming judgment of Assyria. He pictures the great Assyrian armies as a forest that's chopped down, leaving only stumps.

This chapter is Isaiah's next prophecy. As we read, try to put yourselves in the shoes of the Judeans. We're a small, relatively weak nation. Our sister nation to the North, Israel, has just been utterly destroyed, and refugees have flooded into our country. Our king has made some questionable decisions, and it's pretty clear he's not faithful to God. He claims to represent the long line of David's dynasty, but most of us don't trust his rule. Things are tough economically, scary politically and people are wondering if God is really faithful to the promises made to David long ago.

And then Isaiah does something really cool, really powerful. He offers two pictures - like Hicks' *Peaceable Kingdom* painting. Artists call this a diptych - two images meant to be viewed side-by-side. Let's look at each picture by itself, then put them together. Here's the first:

Out of the stump of David's family will grow a shoot— yes, a new Branch bearing fruit from the old root. And the Spirit of the LORD will 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. He will delight in obeying the LORD. He will not judge by appearance nor make a decision based on hearsay. He will give justice to the poor and make fair decisions for the exploited. The earth will shake at the force of his word, and one breath from his mouth will destroy the wicked. He will wear righteousness like a belt and truth like an undergarment.

[**Tree stump**] David's dynasty isn't impressive in Isaiah's day. Ahaz isn't a good king, and he's making a lot of questionable, immoral decisions. He's not much better than the Assyrians. It feels like the great tree

of David's dynasty has been felled too. But Isaiah asks us to look closer: there's new growth coming out of the old stump. It's a new king, a new leader. He rules with wisdom and justice. He is faithful to God. He defends the vulnerable.

He is, in short, the fulfillment of every dream of God's people.

And it's not hard to imagine that, in Isaiah's day, a ruler like this felt pretty impossible. Know anyone today who's a little cynical about politics? A person who doesn't trust anyone in either party, who thinks politics is all self-interested and sold out to lobbyists?

Yeah... Isaiah's vision feels pretty impossible in our day too, doesn't it?

Now, before we move onto the next picture, I want to ask what would be on this side of the diptych for you. Maybe it *is* a new ruler, a politician who truly embodies the way of Jesus in the world, who leads with humility, kindness and love, who defends the vulnerable and lifts up the weak.

Maybe it's a picture of financial stability and security. Or maybe it's a table where everyone is laughing and smiling instead of yelling. A chair that's not empty anymore.

What's that impossible thing you're picturing, that thing you want but are sure you'll never actually have?

I want to ask you to picture what's on this side of the diptych for you because when we contemplate the way things are, it's easy to glamorize days gone by. You can hear the prophet flirting with nostalgia here by conjuring the image of David. For Judah, David was the great king. Never mind his rule had ended over 300 years ago. No king who came after David could ever match the wisdom and glory of David's rule (this despite the fact that David was... sort of a terrible king, and left his kingdom on the verge of civil war).

Nostalgia is the great danger when times are tough. It's no accident that, in a time of great cultural anxiety, nostalgia is our drug of choice. From reboots of everything from Full House to Fresh Prince to Stranger Things, which is a show that trades entirely on how great the 1980s were. If we're not careful, nostalgia becomes a form of escapism. We idolize the past, imagining things were better back then.

Which may or may not have been true (I don't know what the 80s was like for you). What I *do* know is that it doesn't *matter* what the 80s were like, or how great king David was because the past is past. We can't get back to it. And when we live looking backwards, it keeps us from looking *forward*.

Which primes us to look at the next picture:

In that day the wolf and the lamb will live together; the leopard will lie down with the baby goat. The calf and the yearling will be safe with the lion, and a little child will lead them all. The cow will graze near

the bear. The cub and the calf will lie down together. The lion will eat hay like a cow. The baby will play safely near the hole of a cobra. Yes, a little child will put its hand in a nest of deadly snakes without harm. -- Isaiah 11:1-8

Here's that impossible scene Hicks painted, the lion and lamb scene, the predator and prey scene. If you were one of the Judahites who heard Isaiah's vision for the first time, you'd be facing a tough question. The prophet shows you two pictures - a true and righteous king who brings peace to all peoples on one side and on the other side, mortal animal enemies living in harmony.

Which feels *less* possible? Which feels less likely to come true?

We might ask the same about our own diptychs. There are things we all hope for, wounds that are unhealed, anxieties that worsen, pains that deepen. Injustices unresolved. And we can't even *imagine* how they might be made right.

And yet this is exactly where *hope* comes into play. When we *hope*, we choose to believe that God isn't finished with us. That a new growth is emerging from that old stump. That all the promises God made will be fulfilled.

Advent is a season of hope because, as impossible as it might have seemed to Isaiah and his contemporaries, God's promises came true on that first Christmas. We're living in the hinge of the diptych now, between the birth of that good and just king and the final fulfillment when he returns to establish peace on the whole earth.

Friends, this is the season we hope. No matter how dark our days, we are convinced dawn is just over the horizon, that the days are getting longer, that Jesus is coming again.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Jesus offers us hope around the table. Grounded in reality of meal to anticipate future hope.

1. What am I hoping for this Advent season?
2. Where am I tempted to despair?
3. How can I trust God's promises this Advent season?