

**Rev. Kevin V. Madigan**  
**Church of St. Thomas More, NYC**  
**December 4, 2022**  
**Advent 2nd Sunday of Year A Is 11:1-10; Rom 15:4-9; Mt 3:1-12**

Edward Hicks, a Quaker minister, painted the scene depicted in today's first reading of the wolf dwelling with the lamb, etc. in a work entitled, "The Peaceable Kingdom" no less than 62 times. It seems as if he was always trying to get it just right. This is a theme we might reflect on today--how do we get right the image Isaiah presents to us today, one wherein those creatures who are usually at odds with each other, wherein one is predator and the other prey, are living in peace? How is that message translated into our society where rivalry, revenge, and rancor are too often the order of the day, where tribalism, where a pattern of "us" against "them" arises in so many different contexts? Isaiah depicts a blurring, a blending, a bringing together of what we might think of as irreconcilable opposites, and in the resultant mix, new arrangements, new patterns, new harmonies are achieved. The question is how do we get there?

Before that Biblical promise has the chance of becoming a possibility, intervening between the old and the new, comes the figure of John the Baptist. John goes down to the Jordan, the river the Jews had crossed centuries before when they first entered the Promised Land. It was that moment when they began a new life, after having been enslaved in Egypt. John is announcing that something "new" is about to happen again. He tells people to forget about the Temple, the place where they were accustomed to go to have their sins forgiven, and instead to "wade in the waters," as the old spiritual phrases it, and there be cleansed of their sins. For John, the Temple had become a sort of business where people could sacrifice an animal, convinced that now they were right with God, and then go on their way without any real change in their behavior. John is calling for a whole new attitude, a change of heart, that would show itself in a new approach to life, a way of life distinguished by good deeds. All this was to get ready for the One who was to come after, whom John announced was greater than himself.

Still, the contrast between the style and ministry of John and Jesus was so stark that we might wonder if the disciples of John were not just a bit confused, maybe even disappointed, in the way Jesus turned out. After all Jesus did not preach with the same ferocity as did John. John speaks of "the axe being laid to the root of the tree," with "every tree that is not fruitful, to be cut down and thrown into the fire." Jesus instead tells the parable of the gardener who asks the owner of the field to give the barren tree a chance of one more year to bear fruit. John announces that the coming Messiah

“will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” Jesus tells the parable of the wheat and the weeds growing together. His disciples are to refrain from passing judgment on who are the “true believers,” and who not. They are told not to make those neat distinctions between “us” and “them” that serve to make life simple, because life is never so simple; it will always be messy.

Although John distanced himself both literally and figuratively from the Temple, and although he looked to the future, his message still embodied a way of thinking that was too stuck in the past. John represents an approach to religion, wherein a kind of black-and-white grid is imposed on life to distinguish good from evil, friend from foe, and sacred from profane. For those who accept this way of looking at life, a certain sense of security is provided in believing that everything and everyone has its proper place, and more importantly, should be kept in its proper place. As a consequence, divine sanction is given to social arrangements, biases and prejudices that are merely the creation of powerful groups within that society, most often for the purpose of maintaining their own vested interests, at the expense of others. So pervasive was this evil that Jesus criticized the religious leaders of His day saying, “You teach as dogmas mere human precepts.” Theirs was an attempt to make life neat and orderly, to keep at bay the chaos of human existence. It would be nice if life could be so simple.

Because we should not judge by appearances, because things are not always as they seem to be, the gospel would remind us that many of the handy distinctions we’ve come up with, that we use to direct our lives, may play the very same role as they did for the people in the time of Jesus. They just enable us to stick with the same tired, worn out patterns of the past to avoid the risk of engaging the world in a new way. We absolve ourselves from ever having to learn anything new; we think we have it all figured out. As a result, the grid of those black-and-white distinctions we impose on life to make things simpler, those very distinctions of human, not divine manufacture, may prevent us from seeing how seeming irreconcilable opposites can indeed be fitted together to provide a fuller, a richer picture of life.

At Christmas we will again profess to believe in a God who becomes Human, a King who is poor, a Teacher who comes in the form of a child. Jesus is the Lord of paradox Who would enlarge our imaginations to dream all sorts of possibilities, because things are not always as they appear to be. At Christmas we will celebrate God invading the messiness of human life and taking upon Godself all its limitations, all its contradictions, all its loose ends. If it be true that a tolerance for ambiguity is the necessary condition for any kind of creativity, then our willingness to abandon neat

distinctions and live with the edges blurred will help us to recognize and live out the new vision of life Jesus is offering to us. Let us pray that this Christmas we will be able to see with the eyes of a faith renewed, that joyfully we can engage life with all its complexity, ambiguity, richness and wonder.