



The Peaceable Kingdom

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Christmas is fast approaching, and will be here before we know it. For a lot of us, Advent can be an ambivalent time. There are so many wonderful opportunities for connection and generosity but they are often accompanied by the pressures of doing things a certain way, finding just the right thing, or needing to accomplish too many things in too little time.

We celebrate Christmas within a culture that attempts to commodify it, to use it to make us consume ever more. So often times, the Christmas season becomes very much about fulfilling expectations, getting what we want, or making sure other people get what they want. It becomes about recreating celebratory spaces because of how we want to feel. We practice rituals that make us feel warm and fuzzy, we put up sparkly decorations that make us feel excited, we make lists of gifts so that people can be sure to give us what we want.

But, of course, this is not really what the season is about. As our readings make clear, the season is about change, about reversal. What kind of God, what kind of birth, are we really celebrating here? Baby Jesus was born into poverty on the margins, what kind of God would do that? Jesus would grow up to minister to those excluded and forgotten, what kind of God would do that? Jesus died to bring a kingdom into being via sacrificial suffering, what kind of God would do that? A God who understands that the way we human beings usually do things takes us further away from love and further into fear and selfishness. A God who, lovingly, wants to help us change this tendency.

And so we begin with imagery from the Old Testament: the peaceable kingdom.

*“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.”¹*

¹ *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

This beautiful and pastoral imagery has inspired many throughout history and no surprise. In the words of one commentary, this “vision of a reordered creation is remarkable.” It tells a story of instincts transformed and reversed. Carnivorous animals will no longer kill their prey to eat but find sustenance in straw. Dangerous animals will no longer be a threat to vulnerable creatures such as children. It is a lovely, peaceful image, but it also something of a ridiculous one. We know that nature cannot change in this way. So, of course, the image is a metaphor. It casts a vision of a future in which predatory instincts do not prevail, or are not primary. “They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain.” The image is not literal but rather communicates something about the world which God wants to create for us.

But, it is not a world that God can, or will, create for us externally. God certainly could do so, but given human nature, it would not really work. Swedenborg writes:

*“...the Lord leaves each person in freedom, for unless a person is in freedom they cannot be reformed at all. What a person does under compulsion does not reform them because compulsion does not allow anything to take root; for anything a person does under compulsion is not an act of willing, whereas what they do in freedom is an act of willing. What is good and true, if it is to be present in a person as their own, must take root in their will. What is outside the will is not the person's own.”*²

-Secrets of Heaven §7007:2

So, as much as we might wish for it to be so, the vision of the peaceable kingdom cannot be brought about through purely external change. It is transformation that must come from within. And this is because, as Swedenborg points out, “our outer self has to be reformed by means of our inner self, and not the reverse,”³ because the inner flows into the outer and not the other way around. But even further, this flow is not a passive one, it occurs in and through action. And I quote:

² Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Secrets of Heaven*. West Chester: Swedenborg Foundation, 2010

³ Swedenborg, Emanuel. *Divine Providence*. West Chester: Swedenborg Foundation, 2010

“The inner self is not reformed simply by gaining knowledge, understanding, and wisdom, not, that is, simply by thinking. We are reformed inwardly by intending to do what our knowledge, intelligence, and wisdom tell us.”

-Heaven and Hell §110

So even though the peaceable kingdom represents an internal transformation of humankind, it is again, not something that comes into being without our active participation. We are not transformed via divine download. We are not transformed by learning the truth, nor by thinking the truth. This is not enough. Transformation happens by actually intending and doing the things dictated by transformed ways of thinking.

Which sound easy, but of course, it's not. Even when we know about what is right and good, there are many reasons why we might not follow through, emotions or habits that get in the way. If we zoom in on the peaceable kingdom, we can see this represented by the animals included in the vision and what they are doing. In terms of Swedenborgian correspondences, animals represent our affections: how we feel and what we love.⁽⁴⁾ In the context of the image of the peaceable kingdom, the mild, useful, friendly animals correspond to good affections, and fierce, deadly animals correspond to evil affections. And what are we looking at here in this image? Fierce, deadly, selfish affections that have been transformed, that have been stripped of their predatory nature. They are no longer killing, destroying, striking out, or preying on the vulnerable. Transformed instincts. Transformed ways of being. And so it is inside of each of us: The vision of the peaceable kingdom is a vision of our internal ways of being, the possibility of our own instincts being re-formed, away from selfish and fearful affections into useful, loving, peaceful ones.

Swedenborg describes this change and how it happens:

“The first state is a state of thought that occurs in our intellect; the second state is a state of love that occurs in our will. As the second state begins and progresses, a change takes place in our minds. There is a reversal, because then the love in our will flows into our intellect and leads and drives it to think in agreement and harmony with what we love. As good actions that come from

love take on a primary role, and the truths related to faith are relegated to a secondary role, we become spiritual and are a new creation.

Then our actions come from goodwill and our words come from faith; we develop a sense of the goodness that comes from goodwill and a perception of the truth that is related to faith; and we are in the Lord and in a state of peace. In brief, we are reborn.”⁴

What an optimistic view of humanity! The more we love, the more loving we will become. And conversely, sadly, the less we love, the less loving and more selfish we will become.

This notion is directly linked to the New Church vision for the world, the coming of the New Jerusalem in the book of Revelation. In that book, John of Patmos receives a vision of a shining city, which he called the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God to the earth. We don't believe this literally, as if a city will plop down out of the sky like an alien spaceship. We understand it to be a metaphor for the transformation of humanity and the world we live in. But it is important to split hairs just a little bit, and point out that, even if it is a metaphor, it is not, as we have mentioned, a metaphor for an external transformation, just as the peaceable kingdom is not a metaphor for external transformation. God is working, yes God is working very hard to bring the New Jerusalem into being, but God is doing it through our hearts and minds. The coming of the New Jerusalem is an internal phenomenon; the transformation of our world through the transformation of the people in it. We are talking about transformed instincts on a global scale. Little by little, bit by bit, heart by heart.

We see this reflected in the document “The Faith and Aims of Our Church,” which can be found in our denomination's yearly journal:

“The Swedenborgian church believes that a new epoch is opening in the spiritual life of mankind. We believe that the Lord Jesus Christ, as he promised to do, has come again, not indeed in a

⁴ Swedenborg, Emanuel. *True Christianity*. West Chester: Swedenborg Foundation, 2010

physical reappearance, but in spirit and truth; not in a single event only, but in a progressive manifestation of God's presence among people.”⁵

This is what God is up to with Advent. Hope, yes, love, yes, beauty, yes, all of it. But also subversive change. Transformed instincts. And this is why we always seem to start Advent off with John the Baptist, preaching repentance. John the Baptist doesn't feel like Christmas. He is not warm and fuzzy. He is not twinkle lights and soft music. He is strident, he is urgent, he is clear. He is talking about doing the work of transforming our instincts. About how we need to recognize that our instincts need transforming, and to give ourselves over to the renewal that God has in mind for us. "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." The way of the Lord is change. Not change for the sake of change, but change for the sake of mutual love, for the sake of the peaceable kingdom.

And so, as we begin Advent, as we look to a season of giving and receiving, let us also make space for a little disturbing. Let us make a space for John the Baptist, cantankerous as he is, so that we might recognize that the Lord was born into our world so that we might have an opportunity to re-make ourselves. I am reminded of this prayer by Jan Richardson:

God of making and unmaking, of tearing down and re-creating, you are my home and habitation, my refuge and place of dwelling. In your hollows I am re-formed, given welcome and benediction, beckoned to rest and rise again, made ready and sent forth.⁶

It is Advent, and we are ready, Lord. Transform our instincts so that the peaceable kingdom may come into being, so that the wolf may lie down with the lamb, and be led by innocence, openness and vulnerability.

Amen.

⁵ *The Journal of the Swedenborgian Church of North America*, Cambridge: General Conv. of the New Jerusalem. 2019

⁶ Richardson, Jan L. *Night Visions: Searching the Shows of Advent and Christmas*. Wanton Gospeller Press. 2010