

“The Lion and the Lamb”

On the wall of my minister’s study, there is an old print titled “Noah’s Ark” that shows the animals boarding a big house boat. The camels are on the gang plank. In the foreground, a long procession of patiently waiting elk and oxen winds into the distance. A lion accompanied by his mate glances back toward two sheep standing just behind him, with a worried look on his face, which is funny, because you think it might be the sheep who would be worried. But it’s not. This lion looks like he’s worried about what’s for lunch. Like maybe only veggies are being served.

The image is from a nineteenth century American artist named Edward Hicks who is most famous for a painting titled “Peaceable Kingdom.” He started out painting signs, along with patriotic scenes like Washington crossing the Delaware. But over the years, he was drawn repeatedly to images based on the old prophecies of the Bible, as in Isaiah:

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them.

In the beginning, according to the book of Genesis, all creatures lived in harmony. Animals were meant to be companions for the human race, and none preyed on the others. This was paradise, the gentle garden that God intended for the world, and that would one day prevail again, at least if people like Edward Hicks had anything to say about it.

Hicks was a Quaker who took peace seriously. Like most Friends, he renounced war and violence. He espoused simple living, and like many early pacifists opposed the slave trade that flourished back then. He believed that all people had an “inner light” or moral compass that could help them to walk in the ways of sisterhood and brotherhood as children of one Creator.

One painting of the “Peaceable Kingdom” shows a little child patting a leopard’s nose, another toddler draping his arm around a tiger’s neck in the foreground. But in the distance, beyond the bears and cattle and lions who sit neatly posed for a group portrait, another scene is unfolding. There William Penn, who founded the colony of Pennsylvania on Quaker principles of religious toleration, is signing a treaty with the Indians, not taking the land by military force but negotiating with them as equal partners whose rights deserve to be respected. I’m not sure if Edward Hicks took Isaiah literally, if he really thought dogs and cats and wolves and sheep could all live together as pals. But he thought people could. And he painted almost a hundred versions of this same scene over the course of his lifetime in witness to that vision.

I was reminded of Edward Hicks’ painting by this morning’s story of Owen and Mzee, the baby hippo and the tortoise who befriended each other at a sanctuary in Kenya. Maybe Owen sees a mamma hippo when he looks at Mzee’s round grey shell, but what

does the reptile see in Owen? We can't be sure, but it's created an alliance that seems to bring pleasure to both. I'm reminded, too, of a similar scene that came to my attention recently: a mother tiger, nursing five little pigs dressed in tiger outfits, snoozing comfortably, nuzzling each other, lying side by side. The unlikely family lives at the Sriracha Tiger Zoo in Thailand, which specializes in cross-species adoptions, and where the mama cat was suckled by pig herself in infancy, leaving her a little confused about her identity. That's an artificial situation maybe, but the instinct to nurture crosses the species barrier in nature, too. Pigeons will take in unrelated chicks that have been abandoned, purely out of parental concern. A daddy Mourning Dove was observed brooding and feeding nestling White-winged Doves whose own father had disappeared.

And if animals can reach beyond familiar limits it gives me optimism to think that people might eventually learn to do the same. Mark Twain doubted it, comparing the human race unfavorably with he called "the higher animals" and conducting mock research to prove it. "Among my experiments was this," he wrote. "In an hour I taught a cat and a dog to be friends. I put them in a cage. In another hour I taught them to be friends with a rabbit. In the course of two days I was able to add a fox, a goose, a squirrel and some doves. Finally a monkey. They lived together in peace; even affectionately.

"Next, in another cage I confined an Irish Catholic from Tipperary, and as soon as he seemed tame I added a Scotch Presbyterian from Aberdeen. Next a Turk from Constantinople; a Greek Christian from Crete; an Armenian; a Methodist from the wilds of Arkansas; a Buddhist from China; a Brahman from Benares. Finally, a Salvation Army Colonel from Wapping. Then I stayed away two whole days." Needless to say, when he returned, the results were not pretty, a disarray of fezzes and rosaries and turbans scattered about.

But if sectarian bickering is part of our culture, I don't think it's part of our biology. And I find it hopeful to know that people are animals, because the budgies and rabbits and goldfish who attend our annual "Blessing of the Animals" ceremony are usually the best behaved members of the congregation. My dog Smokey (who's here this morning) likewise seems to have learned that the chickens we keep out back are friends, not food, and while he may be interested in eating the bread and old melon rinds I toss into the hen yard, he doesn't seem interested in eating the hens. I guarantee he doesn't judge others based on their theology, or skin color, or Kennel Club pedigree. Do you think there might be a lesson for us there?

Gathered here this morning in our own Peaceable Kingdom, sitting foot to paw with ferrets and felines and gerbils, we give thanks that love transcends all boundaries, passing over even the gulf between the species to bind together the furred, the finny and the flying, reminding us that life is one seamless community. Surely as part of that community humankind will rise one day to become both humane and kind.