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An Enduring Peace

ANDY ALEXIS-BAKER*

When Alan Kreider taught early Christian history, he used ancient images to demonstrate the dramatic shifts from the earliest centuries to Christendom. The compelling images visibly demonstrated, for example, changing views of Jesus. Jesus changed from an approachable, simply-dressed shepherd or healer into a lavishly-adorned and enthroned emperor before whom one had to grovel. Alan loved an image that depicted Jesus as Orpheus playing the harp while nonhuman animals listened peacefully. It reminded Alan of Isaiah 11:6-9. Indeed, Isaiah 11 was a powerful image for Christian and Jewish people. For example, at the ancient Meroth Synagogue quotes from Isaiah 11 and 65 adorn the walls, and a mosaic of a wolf lying down with a lamb adorns the floor.

In his missions classes, Alan projected Edward Hicks's paintings based on Isaiah 11. Hicks's sixty-two peaceable kingdom paintings fascinated Alan. He read books on the paintings. He had students analyze and respond to them. His enthusiasm for the imagery of Isaiah 11 left students spellbound. We, too, learned to love those images. Alan's teaching stuck with me, and as I later researched other artwork, I discovered Fritz Eichenberg's wood engravings of the peaceable kingdom, which he printed beautifully in black and white. As I took up creating artwork again, I have repeatedly returned to Isaiah 11:6-9, thinking of these great artists.

I created the image reproduced here to honor Alan's memory and legacy. The image is in the tradition of Hicks and Eichenberg but on a very different medium. It is an etching with dry point and engraving on a 9" x 12" copper plate. It includes Isaiah's iconic imagery of a leopard, wolf, lion, and bear living peaceably alongside more vulnerable creatures with their young playing together. However, I have some additions. The city of Chicago, where I live and teach, inhabits part of the background. The Book of Revelation imagines a city that no longer desolates the environment or makes war. Drawing on such hope, Alan repeatedly extolled students to seek the "welfare of the city."

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Trees play an essential role in the opening chapters of Genesis and one stands in the middle of Revelation's New Jerusalem. For this image, a bodhi tree shades all of the creatures. I selected a bodhi tree because, in Buddhist thought, it symbolizes awakening from delusions. Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, "woke up" from his own ignorance and delusion under a bodhi tree and spent his life helping people not to harm others. Some people think Isaiah 11 is a utopian dream, but under the bodhi tree, the Buddha discovered that the real delusion is thinking that violence is more real than the peace. Isaiah agrees. So would Alan.

Alan cared about his students' spirituality. He wanted students to have an inner joy that radiated outward. It was his hardest and most enduring lesson. For me, it took training in Zen meditation to begin to understand Alan's inner peace. The Buddhist monk under the tree, with a lamb in his lap, looks toward not only a political and creation-wide peace but also inward peace that radiates outward to all creatures.

So I have brought in ideas from Buddhist thought that complement Isaiah's creation-wide peace vision because I think they strengthen the imagery. Alan would not be afraid of the Buddhist imagery. He loved the image of Jesus as Orpheus. And if Orpheus was fitting, how much more so a man who woke up and taught love for all creatures. I could have written an article to honor Alan, but his most enduring legacy for me goes beyond head knowledge. Long after I left AMBS Alan's most penetrating question for me when we spoke was always, "Do you know peace yet?" Lacking words to really answer, the image is my response to Alan's question.

NOTE: With generous funding from the Anabaptist Foundation and strong collaboration from Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Kyle Hiebert Gingerich is undertaking the task of creating a digital archive of Alan Kreider's published work. The repository will be hosted by Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary and will eventually contain a comprehensive annotated bibliography of all of Alan's publications. Additionally, and as far as possible given copyright restrictions, the repository will also host full text PDF's of each entry. The entire digital archive will be searchable and is intended to serve as a valuable resource for the church and the academy. For more information, go to the website of the bibliography at: <https://libraryguides.ambbs.edu/kreider>.