



# First United Church of Oak Park

God's Big Dream

Isaiah 2:1-5

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Horace Phippen, the artist who painted the scene that is reproduced on our bulletin this morning, (see below) was a man who dreamed of peace. I know that I've talked to you about Horace Phippen before, in an evotional I wrote last spring, and I hope you will forgive me some of the repetition. But, he seemed to be such a perfect person to highlight today: Armistice/ Veterans' Day.



Horace Phippen was a World War I veteran who served in the 369th infantry unit. He was also, like most of his fellow infantrymen, an African American. This unit was entirely comprised of African Americans and Puerto Ricans. It is perhaps no accident that of all the infantry units that served in France during WWI, his unit saw the most continuous days of fighting and suffered the most casualties of any U.S. fighting unit. At one point, his unit was on the front lines for six months straight, apparently setting a record. Phippen paid a heavy price for that. Toward the end of the war the wounds he sustained paralyzed his right arm. Even without the

wounds, Horace Pippin knew firsthand the horrors of war; he said it was hell, “no place for any human being to be.”<sup>1</sup>

Horace Pippin knew about war, and he dreamed of peace.

The same could possibly be said of us, even though we have not suffered in the same trenches that Horace Pippin did. Even though we have different life experiences, like Pippin we too live in a historical moment that is caught between the realities of war and peace. We are engaged in the longest war that our nation has ever waged and, at the same time, today we mark the armistice that ended World War I, 100 years ago exactly.

This painting depicts the conflicting realities of war and dreams of peace. This is one of three of Pippin’s paintings that illustrate God’s peaceable kingdom – the promised place where the lion shall lie down with the lamb, and a little child shall lead them, and there will be no more hurt or destruction.

There are many things I love about Pippin’s peaceable kingdom paintings. I love the vivid colors. I love the black shepherd – the black Jesus. And I really love the background, the figures hidden in the forest, because those are what give these paintings complexity and remind us of the complexity that we live in every day. In the background are graves, reminders of the graves and fields of white crosses that are found on European battlegrounds or in Arlington National Cemetery. Also in the background are planes dropping bombs, soldiers running across the landscape and, in some, the silhouette of a lynching. The figures hidden at the back of the paintings remind us of the brutality of war and racism against which all dreams of peace are cast. Pippin had a grim awareness of how big a distance there can be between human reality and God’s dreams for us. With this visual commentary about violence and destruction, set against a peaceable kingdom, Pippin’s holy mountain scenes argue for peace and justice.

There is a final commentary that Pippin has snuck into these pictures: the dates that he’s assigned to them. I don’t know when Pippin actually painted these works, but he dated them on Pearl Harbor day, D-Day, and August 9, 1945, the day the U.S. dropped an atomic bomb on Nagasaki. Surely those are meant to remind us of something, too.

I love these paintings. Horace Pippin is one of my spiritual heroes. I love the social commentary that he inserts into some of his work, and I also admire his resiliency.

Pippin was right handed, so the injury that paralyzed his right arm was devastating to him. It hampered his ability to earn a living. But, even worse for someone who engaged the world through his art, it destroyed his ability to draw. But he was determined. And, among the many things he figured out how to do with a paralyzed right arm, was how to make art again. What he did was learn how to hold a brush into his right hand, while he held up his right arm with his left. And then he could guide his arm. One of the things this wounded warrior did with his paralyzed right arm, was to paint pictures of peace.

Painting was hard work for Pippin. Peace is hard work, too. An article I was reading this week brought this home to me. The author, Donald Miller, writes about accompanying his father on an errand when Miller was a

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.historynet.com/horace-pippin-world-war-i-veteran-and-artist.htm>  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horace\\_Pippin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horace_Pippin)  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/369th\\_Infantry\\_Regiment\\_\(United\\_States\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/369th_Infantry_Regiment_(United_States))

boy. They took the plows they were going to use for spring planting on their farm to a place where they could be sharpened. Miller writes that

Beating swords into plowshares is not a passive or weak image. As a child I went with my father to the blacksmith shop. . . . The suffocating heat, the dangerous glowing metal, the heavy hammer strokes, the shower of sparks - this was hard work. So the work of changing our communities from cultures of violence to cultures of justice and peace is hard work.<sup>2</sup>

Yes, it's hard work. One reason I so admire Horace Phippen is that he never gave up. In his little corner of God's vineyard, in a small town in eastern Pennsylvania where his wife took in laundry to make ends meet, he kept the faith. He worked for peace. With the gifts and passion God had given him, he shared God's dream. May God grant us grace to do the same.  
Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Donald E. Miller. "Ain't Gonna Study War no More: Isaiah 2: 1-4," *Brethren Life and Thought* 52:4 (Fall 2007), 201.