

Living into the Vision for Peace

Isaiah 2:2-4

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Among the Biblical images that have shaped my understanding of what it means to live by faith is the loud, dramatic image of a sword beaten into a plowshare; a spear re-forged into a pruning hook. When I read these verses of Scripture, I can feel the heat of the fire in the blacksmith's forge; I can picture the red-hot metal softening; I can hear the pounding of the sledge hammer mashing the implements of war into the implements of agricultural. In my own faith journey, right up there with the cross and the empty tomb, is the warrior's sword beaten into a farmer's plow. The metals of the earth can be used for war or they can be used for peace. Isaiah does not ride the fence. He favors peace.

We can, of course, treat this prophetic language metaphorically. We can think that Isaiah was really talking about words that wound, words that can be altered to a vocabulary of non-violent antonyms. "Hatred," for example, might be erased and the word "tolerance" substituted. Thinking metaphorically, we might reach the conclusion that Isaiah would have us put aside the biting language of sarcasm and choose the soothing language of praise instead.

But as I read these ancient words over and over, I found myself needing to take them quite literally. I found myself believing Isaiah wanted his listeners to take these words at face value, and then to live into God's vision of peace. What I know is that in the world today there are enough nuclear weapons to destroy the planet about 150 times over. Super powers have them. Emerging nations have them. Rogue nations want to acquire them.

We have in our collective arsenals all the fire power we need to eliminate the human race. Evidently, no one bothered to consult Isaiah on the matter of nuclear warheads.

During their time in office, Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev sat down at a table and ironed out a Strategic Arms Reduction Proposal, known as SALT III, to begin a process of beating missiles into sardine cans, rockets into coffee mugs, atomic bombs into John Deere tractors. These two political giants of the 1980's saw the peril of their nuclear arsenals and decided to do something about it. They signed a treaty. That treaty was ratified by the US Senate and the Russian Kremlin. The world took a giant step toward peace, toward living into Isaiah's vision.

In December of 2009, that historic treaty expired. Like a library book on loan, its expiration date arrived. The nuclear disarmament treaty sits in the halls of Congress and Kremlin waiting to be re-ratified. We don't hear much about this in the news. We hear about the financial crisis and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; we hear about the race for governor and the flooding in Wisconsin; we hear about the oil spill in the Gulf and the border security in Arizona. But almost no one is talking about the status of the one treaty that holds the potential to reduce the number of nuclear warheads aimed at the world's children and grandchildren. In Isaiah 2:2-4, the prophet is asking us to talk about this matter, to educate ourselves on the dangers of a nuclear war, to get the treaty out of committee and onto the floor in Washington D.C.

To live into Isaiah's vision for peace is to take the next step toward disarming the nuclear threat whether it be in North Korea or Chicago, Moscow or Oslo, Teheran or London. And that next step would be to reaffirm the treaty Mr. Reagan and Mr. Gorbachev signed 25 years ago. I am not an expert on this matter. I have done some reading of the magazine, Reflections, published by Yale University.

This magazine is available this morning for you in the narthex and in the social hall. I am not an expert on disarmament, but I am reading the wisdom of those who are: George Shultz, William Perry, Henry Kissinger, Sam Nunn, and General Colin Powell. When I place the writings of these seasoned leaders in one hand and the Bible in the other hand, I am overwhelmed by an impulse to be a catalyst for disarmament. We don't need to agree about all the details. But I hope we could agree the time has come, again, for a national dialogue. Jonathan Granoff, president of the Global Security Institute has written, "Nuclear weapons represent a thoroughly modern dilemma, whereby the means of pursuing security actually undermine security itself."

What is it that makes a nation or a family secure? The authorities all agree security is not achieved by stockpiling more and more nuclear weapons. What then leads to a lasting sense of security? The answer lies, in part, in Isaiah's vision. The plow and the pruning hook are tools for growing food. I contend that neighborhoods and nations are secure when everyone has enough to eat, when hunger no longer robs people of their dignity. I suppose this is why I always say YES when I'm asked to go gleaning, why I always walk in the CROP Walk, why I gave Divison Chikatiko and his village near Salima, Malawi \$100 to install an irrigation pump. Security in this world has something to do with producing and distributing enough food.

Security has to do with knowing people across town, across the country, across the border, across the ocean, across the desert. A few weeks ago, Glastonbury High School Spanish students hosted international students from Spain. They stayed in our Glastonbury homes, attended our Glastonbury churches, and made new friends in our neighborhoods. This winter, the host students will travel to Spain to continue the relationship. This is one example of what it means to build up security in the world. It is a form of diplomacy.

Having participated in this exchange, Alicia Garten and her generation is far less likely to drop a nuclear bomb on Madrid and visa versa.

Security has to do with learning to value the language and the culture of the other. If, over the last 23 years, I have preached 700 sermons, you would have heard me tell many stories of eating Indian fry bread and wojape, stories in Chichewa language, illustrations from the Sahara Desert. I've tried to reveal my passion for what other cultures have taught me about being a decent human being, about accessing the sacred, about living in covenant with the earth.

A few years ago, my son, Sam, accompanied me to Malawi. Within a day or two he had befriended Edward Kambatuwa, the director of sports. Edward coaches the girl's net ball team. Sam jumped right in and learned the rules of netball, learned the subtle moves, and awed that village that a guy from America would care about a game for girls in Africa. Then a few days after that, most of the youth were out on the soccer field throwing the Frisbee around, learning the in's and out's of Ultimate Frisbee. Sam happened to have had a few discs in his luggage! This is what security is made of, an honoring of the other's culture.

Security has to do with having faith the size of a mustard seed, believing it is possible to uproot a broom tree and plant over there, believing it is possible to re-forged the implements of war into implements of peace, believing that believing matters!

On World Communion Sunday, I want the church to focus on world peace. I want us to engage our senators and our neighbors in a dialogue about nuclear disarmament and about the lasting sources of security. We need not create a whole new vision for this. Isaiah provided it in the 6th Century B.C. "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks;

nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.”

On World Communion Sunday, I want the church to focus on the peace of Christ...that is...the peace that begins with me...with me seeing the Christ in you and you seeing the Christ in me.

I hope every family will pick up a copy of REFLECTIONS, do some reading, and get involved in the world-wide strategy to reduce the number of nuclear warheads. I hope every family will ponder deeply where true security lies. This is the kind of legacy we want to leave to our children and grandchildren. In the greatest of hope, Amen.