

“Holding Up the Vision of Peace”

Isaiah 2:1-5

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November 28, 2004

South Glastonbury

Connecticut

The work of a prophet is to hold up a vision for the community. Without a vision, a community will perish. Communities must be very careful about the vision that is lifted up because the vision shapes the community. Throughout the Bible, the prophets hold up those visions that are understood as gifts from God for the people of God.

The prophet Amos held up a vision of a plumb line. A plumb line is a carpenter’s tool that reveals whether the walls of the house he is building are straight up and down or whether they are crooked and need correction. It is a vision of justice. It is a vision that calls the people to walk uprightly, treating each other with fairness and not with crookedness.

The prophet Micah held up a vision of an offering plate. But in the offering plate there was neither check nor cash, neither gold nor silver; neither oil nor cattle. Instead, the offering plate contains a vision of a person walking humbly with God. It is a vision of what God requires. And what God requires has nothing to do with traditional offerings of stuff. What God requires is that we walk humbly upon the earth, that we walk humbly with our neighbor, and that we walk humbly with our God.

The prophet Isaiah, the focus of our text today, offers a very striking vision. It is a vision of peace. This vision is a gift from God for the people of God. The implements of war have been re-forged into the implements of agriculture.

The metal of the sword designed for killing is altered to be a metal that will prepare the soil for planting.

The metal of the spear designed for maiming human beings is altered to be a metal that will prune the fig trees, thus ensuring an even more bountiful harvest! The prophet holds this vision up knowing it will shape the minds and the hearts of the community.

This vision of peace conjures up images of that Henry Wadsworth Longfellow poem, Under the spreading chestnut tree
The village smithy stands;
The smith, a mighty man is he,
With large and sinewy hands;
And the muscles of his brawny arms
Are strong as iron bands.

I can feel the heat from the forge. I can see the beads of sweat on the forehead. I can see the concentration in the eyes. With everything he has, the blacksmith pounds the steel into some tool the farmer will use to till the land.

I am thrilled by this vision of peace: swords into plowshares, spears into pruning hooks. Isaiah lifts up this vision because violence seeks to rule the day. The leaders are leading by violence. The people are living by violence. Violence has become the daily bread of the community. Isaiah does his job. He goes against the grain. He dares to hold up a contrary vision, a vision of shalom, a vision of peace, a vision of what the Apostle Paul called ‘the more excellent way.’

Often, when I go to New York City, I allow time for a stop at the United Nations building. I don’t even need to go inside. For on the front lawn of the UN there is this larger than life sculpture of Isaiah’s vision. I suppose it is possible to walk right past it without seeing it. I can not.

I am halted by the mangled, tangled web of bronze and copper and who knows what other metals. Within the twisted lengths of iron there are remnants of spear heads and sword tips.

But mostly there is the shape of those implements we associate with hay fields and with harvest. There is nothing particularly beautiful about this sculpture, but to me it is the essence of beauty. It is God's own vision of peace.

Most of us here are not artists, certainly not sculptors. Most of us here are not blacksmiths such as Longfellow had in mind. But everyone here is a peacemaker. The work of peacemaking is never someone else's work. It is my work. It is your work. It is our work. To leave the work of peacemaking for another is to walk away from our discipleship. For in a profound sense, there is no other. There is no one else. There is me. There is you.

Our swords and our spears are in our closets, in our garages, under our beds. Our swords and our spears are the harsh judgments we make; they are the wounding words we speak; they are the exclusive legislation bills we pass; they are the attitudes of discrimination we cling to; they are the abuses of power we let slip by unchallenged.

Our swords and our spears await the blacksmith's fire, the blacksmith's anvil, and the blacksmith's hammer. No one else can do this work for us. It is our work to do.

I have heard it said that in our world today there is no prophetic voice. Mother Teresa has died. Martin Luther King, Jr. is dead. Henry Nouwen is gone. Harriet Beecher Stowe is long gone.

So I lift up Isaiah to be the prophet for our time. The Biblical prophet spoke for his own time and for all time. He spoke for his own generation and for every generation.

Isaiah raised up a vision to shape the heart and the mind of the community with a bent toward peace. Today, I lift up Isaiah's vision in the great hope that it still holds the power to shape the hearts and minds of faithful people everywhere. I lift up this vision in Fallujah, in the Sudan, in Detroit, along our border with Mexico. I lift up this vision where domestic violence persists, where binge drinking is encouraged, wherever revenge is the motivation.

Swords will only be beaten into plowshares if I am willing to subject my sword to the blacksmith's fire. Spears will only be beaten into pruning hooks if I am willing to subject my spear to the blacksmith's fire. I really can think of no better way to position ourselves for celebrating Christ's coming into the world than to allow ourselves to be shaped by this ancient vision.

When I was a freshman and in Confirmation class at First Congregational Church in Westfield, the minister took us down into the basement of an abandoned building. On the outside, the building was so non-descript that I had no idea of its historic identity. As we reached the basement, walking by the light of the candles we were carrying, we found ourselves looking through the bars of jail cells that once had held the town's felons. It was spooky and dark and it felt like a haunted house at Halloween. It was my first time to be so close to the iron bars of incarceration.

Twenty years later, as a young dad, I took my children to that building to see those jail cells. But it had all been changed. The City of Westfield had transformed that dark space of vertical bars to a family counseling center, a place where families in crisis could get some help! It looked and felt like a place where reconciliation might be a possibility. And over in one corner, there was the oddest thing, a lamp with a four-sided base.

Each of the four sides was a metal plate from the locks on the cell block I had seen as a child. It was all that was left of the city jail. A lamp. A light for the darkness.

I do not know how peace will happen. But I trust that it will because God says it will. The swords will be beaten into plowshares and the spears into pruning hooks. My Advent prayer is that you and I be willing instruments of that peace.

In the greatest of hope, Amen!