

They Shall

Isaiah 2:1-5

Good morning and happy and blessed Advent. This is the season when we hope for the return of Christ and a time when the world will be a better place. However it is hard for us to see. The genius of Isaiah is that he paints a vivid picture of God's corrective message to the people and the new reality it will create. Along with his contemporary Micah, he enjoined Judah that God requires justice, mercy, and even more, to walk with God. The word of God provides the basis of a new future in which the temple of God becomes the focal point not just of Israel, but of the world. There is a break, a discontinuity, with the way things were. The good news is that tomorrow will be different from yesterday, because the future is based on the promises of God, which are always new.

This oracle is often called the "floating oracle of peace" and it also appears in Micah 4:1-3. It is apparently part of a general prophetic tradition that was available to both of these prophets as a promise of the fulfillment of God's kingdom. This is especially important in times of difficulty when present circumstances seem unpromising; confidence that the future belongs to God gives hope in the present. In Advent we anticipate the coming of Jesus into a world in need of light (v. 5). Every generation needs assurance that the powers of the world—whether the Romans of Jesus' time or the powers of our present age—do not determine the future.

In Isaiah's time the difficult circumstances were probably associated with the Syro-Ephraimitic war, when the northern kingdom of Israel and the Aramaean kingdom of Damascus tried to force Judah into an unwise alliance in opposition to the Assyrian Empire. When these foes finally laid siege to Jerusalem, King Ahaz turned to the prophet Isaiah for advice and assurance.

In response, Isaiah offered a vision of promise that has a number of elements. The first is that regardless of where power seems to lie in the present, the day is coming when God's reign will be established for all humankind to see. God's dwelling on Mount Zion will be central and elevated over all other claims to prominence or power (v. 2).

The temple on Mount Zion in Jerusalem was far more than a matter of local geography. It was the locus of God's presence in the midst of God's people. To envision Zion as elevated above all other mountains and the focus of pilgrimage by all peoples (vv. 2b-3a) is not a political claim by Jerusalem but a spiritual claim of God's presence as the true center to which all nations will eventually flow. Nations will always be in conflict unless God's reign is recognized beyond that of kings and God sits on Mount Zion enthroned above the ark of the covenant, reigning over all other claims to power. The prophet Isaiah understood God's ultimate purpose to bring salvation to all the nations and not simply to Israel. This universal quality of salvation is appropriate during Advent, where Christians celebrate the birth of the child proclaimed with the words "Peace on earth; goodwill to all people."

A part of that hoped-for future day is that all humanity will also recognize the need for God's direction in their lives. Our text said: "he shall teach us his ways," "we shall walk in his paths," "out of Zion shall go forth the law;" "the word of the Lord [will come] from Jerusalem." Ways, paths, law, word—all express the direction that comes from God and counters the alternatives that tempt our allegiance in the world. The ways of this world are self-centered and idolatrous. This verse redirected the faithful to the alternative world created by covenant partnership with God. God is the true source of guidance in human life and community. In Advent, God's word incarnate counters the wisdom of this world.

This new focus brings two results. The first is judgment. Nations and peoples are judged and rebuked (v. 4a). Those in the world who claim authority apart from God's reign are exposed and judged. The world is not the source of true authority, and it is not the source of hope for the future. The world is the source of conflict, the sword, the spear, the making of war. I believe this is the reason this is not only the first Sunday of Advent, but also Peace Sunday, where we preach and teach that wars and conflicts are not what God desires for God's world, but that each of us accept and follow the Prince of Peace!

In God's reign these implements of conflict will be transformed into tools of community (v. 4b). Swords will become plowshares and spears become pruning hooks. Nations will trade in their swords and war will not be the focus of nations. This transformational image has fueled the imagination of many generations. It is the inspiration for a large sculpture that stands outside the General Assembly tower at the United Nations headquarters in New York. The hope is that through the cooperation of nations, the tools of community can replace the weapons of war.

These words move beyond the particularities of immediate conflicts between peoples and nations to find unity in a common hope for the alternative world of God's reign. In Advent we lift our sight beyond the challenges and crises of our own time to participate with the generations since Isaiah in the hope for a world transformed by the final goal of peace and harmony toward which God is moving us.

In the end, the establishment of God's reign is a matter of walking "in the light of the LORD" (v. 5). Light is a strong image in the prophecies of Isaiah, in 9:2, where God's light gives the people hope, and in 42:6, where God's people are called to be a light to the nations. Light is also, of course, one of the primary symbols of Advent. This First Sunday finds the Advent community brimming with confidence. The light of the world is coming in Jesus Christ, and the world will be transformed. We light

the candles of Advent as a foretaste of the light that is to come in Christ. The darkness of the world will not prevail. Conflict is replaced by community, and those who would oppose the advent of God's reign will be judged and overcome. God's light will not be denied. The reign of God will come. **Bruce C. Birch**

For some of us this all sounds absurd! We live lives of bleak realities where there are no clouds with silver lining, and there are definitely no hopes that aggressive nations that have nuclear weapons to use the resources that are used for war into peaceful farm equipment to feed the masses! However Advent proposes impossibilities. The fitting first response is bafflement. The season keeps giving us cause to blurt out the question of Mary: "How can this be?" (Luke 1:34).

We are in the presence of a mystery. God's own justice and peace will occur among the nations "in days to come." What days? How? Perhaps all we can say is that the vision describes what God is, in fact, at work in the world to do. It is what Jesus apparently meant by "the reign of God," which is already present and at work among us, though not yet in fullness. We saw it in Jesus, who converted fear to love, lunacy to sanity, enemies to friends. He died surrounded by swords; a spear stabbed him; nails tore him. They entered infinite love, which "melted them into light."

Isaiah's vision lifts a gleaming promise of what God will do in days to come. "Come, let us walk in the light of the LORD." God's future casts its gleam into the present. We move toward God's future by making our choices—personal, relational, political, communal—in its light.

At St. Louis University is a small Jesuit chapel that is creatively lit. The light fixtures are made of twentieth-century cannon shells, converted. Emptied of their lethal contents, they now hold light for people to pray by. In such light we pray and live. And having laid our own weapons down, we bear witness to the promise of greater transformations in days to come. **Paul Simpson Duke**

I have a lapel pin that is someplace lost in a jewelry box that is in the shape of a pruning hook. When I wear it I remember that it is made of metal that was once an airplane bomber. Though I may never live to see the day...I pray for that day which Isaiah envisioned...

...when the mountain of the LORD'S house shall be established;

...when all the nations shall stream to it;

...when many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, for instruction;

...when God shall judge and shall arbitrate for many peoples;

...when they shall beat weapons into farm tools;

...when nations shall learn war any more;

...when we shall all walk in the light of the LORD!

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