

Isaiah 2:1-5
Nov 28, 2010

South Plains
1st Advent

Swords Into Advent Plowshares

“Everything else can wait. What can’t wait is the search for God.” George Harrison, the Beatle who embraced Indian mysticism, offered these words as a summation of his life. They also work as a caption for the season of Advent. “Everything else can wait. What can’t wait is the search for God.” Advent is the season of waiting, waiting for Christmas, yes. But what we’re really waiting for is God, waiting for God to reveal Godself.

Many of the traditional scripture readings for this season come from the prophet Isaiah. They are windows opening on a kingdom yet to come, the kingdom of God. The first half of Isaiah is a book full of warnings and threats and judgment: storm cloud prophecy. Every now and then, however, a window in the cloudy sky opens up for us to catch a glimpse of the sunshine that will follow the storm. The window in the second chapter of Isaiah is the window of peace.

They shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks. (2:4b)

In my imagination I see a blacksmith heating an iron spear point and beating it into the shape of a hook so a farmer could reach into his olive tree and prune the branches to help the tree bear more olives.

The wartime economy that we have experienced more or less over the past nine years has been both good news and bad news. It’s boosted manufacturers of uniforms and armaments and all the high tech gadgets that soldiers need. On the other hand, many of these products add to the national debt but add little to our standard of living. They do keep us alive and free, no small blessing. But that’s a different blessing from the comforts we would enjoy in a time of relative peace and prosperity. Isaiah’s vision of peace foresees the time when all the implements of destruction and armed hostilities can be turned into tools that build up civilization and enrich the quality of life.

For example those little GPS devices built into some cars and cell phones were originally developed for the military to guide bombs and missiles to their targets. Isaiah’s vision tells us that all our technologies will be turned to peacetime uses.

The biblical vision of peace is much broader obviously than the economic impact alone. Political disputes between the nations will be arbitrated by the Lord. God shall judge between the nations (2:4). This will be possible because everyone will recognize the authority of the Lord. Isaiah 2:3 says,

Many peoples shall come and say, “Come,
let us go up to the mountain of the Lord...
that he may teach us his ways.”

In other words, God is going to resolve all our questions about what justice is and which religion is right. God is

going to summon us all to God's own self with the implication that many, if not all, will be persuaded to come to the Lord.

I think it's dangerous to read current events as the fulfillment of biblical prophecy, but it is very tantalizing to see how the modern city of Jerusalem could come close to a partial embodiment of Isaiah's vision. Jerusalem is a holy city for Jews, Muslims, and Christians. That's what makes it one of the sorest spots in the Middle East today. It also makes Jerusalem a keystone in the arch of peace. Isaiah says nations shall stream to Jerusalem for instruction. He calls it Zion, or the mountain of the Lord. He's talking about Jerusalem becoming a learning center for spirituality. We know better than to hold our breath waiting for this to happen, but this is the vision, the dream, the image of the kingdom of God held up to us in the season of Advent, the season of waiting for peace.

Isaiah opens up this window on peace as a reminder of why we wait for the Lord: because God is the only bringer of true peace. Then, the prophet turns from preaching to meddling. This beautiful, poetic image of the day to come is replaced by an appeal for action. Verse five addresses the people of Israel directly. It also addresses us:

O house of Jacob, come, let us walk
in the light of the Lord. (2:5)

The prophet says, "Hey! I've let some light in your house by opening this window. For your own sake, get out of the shadows and live in the light of the Lord's coming

kingdom. Live every day in the light of the Lord's coming peace."

He's talking to us, of course. At least, he talking to anyone who believes these are not just the words of a prophet from 2700 years ago, but the very word of the Lord. One piece of evidence that these are more than the words of Isaiah is found the book of Micah. Micah 4:1-4 reproduces exactly the same words. Now, as my high school English teacher would say, somebody didn't do their own work. One of these guys plagiarized the other. Or, else this saying belongs to neither prophet. It finally and originally belongs to the Lord. This is God's word to Isaiah and Micah, God's word to you and me, God's timeless word: Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord: The light of the Lord's coming peace.

I believe this means we need to take peacemaking much more seriously than we do in our nation and in our churches. Peacemaking starts at home, because it starts and finishes with the reconciliation Jesus has brought about between us and God. Our sins are forgiven. Therefore, we need to make it our business to find ways to forgive each other. That's what God did. Jesus Christ did not wait for us to search successfully for God. He came searching for us, searching for a way to bring us to God, searching for peace with God, for us.

In that sense, George Harrison is both right and wrong. Our search for God can't wait, not because we can find God, but because God is already searching for

us. Unless we are ready for that search, searching to be found by God, we're wasting precious time on this earth.

Christ is not waiting for North Korea to abandon its nuclear ambitions. Christ is not sitting on the sidelines waiting for Pakistan and India to make nice with each other. Christ is not standing idle until Iran announces that Israel has a right to exist. No, Christ is working through diplomats and politicians in many nations to reconcile all warring nations. Christ is using exchange programs between Israelis and Palestinians to build relationships, educational opportunities here and in universities abroad to increase understanding; foreign aid programs to relieve suffering. These are imperfect, human instruments with shortcomings that can, in Christ's hands and with the influence of the Holy Spirit, be turned to reconciliation and peace.

We can become imitators of Christ, accepting God's peace and joining in the search for peace with others. I know a woman who has spent years looking for ways to make peace with her friend. The peace they've found is not a happily-ever-after peace where the two of them walk arm in arm through life. They may see each other only occasionally, but they continue to search for reconciliation.

I know a couple with a difficult marriage. In today's climate, most people would judge that divorce is fully justified in their case. But, they stay together, walking the rocky path of emotional outbursts and

irrational behavior. Now, I'm not saying every marriage can endure conflict like theirs. But, I do admire this couple for sticking out the search for peace longer than I can imagine most of us doing so. Peace requires perseverance.

Once I was visiting in the home of another couple who have been through some bad times in their relationship. I noticed that the husband in particular seemed happier than I had ever seen him. Finally, I remarked that he looked pretty content with life. He responded almost casually, "Well, we've decided to be nice to each other."

Isaiah's vision of peace is not an illusion, friends. There are moments of peace, a life time of peace, waiting for us to walk in the light of the Lord with perseverance and kindness.

Peace may begin at home, but it cannot and should not stop there. Peace between religious groups or nations requires sacrifice and hard work. Peacemaking is risky business. Peace will come in Afghanistan and Iraq and with other Muslim nations even though it will always be a provisional peace until Christ comes, the Prince of Peace, finally calling the whole world to his kingdom. In the meantime, we who claim his name must claim his heritage and follow in his way of peace. It will not be easy and it does not happen without costly concessions and sacrifice. That's true at home, nationally, and internationally. The role of the Christian

community is to witness to the truth that our final goal in this struggle is not victory for America on the battlefield, but peace among all groups, peace between various religions, and peace with the peoples of the world. Our goal will not be the final peace promised by the prophets. It can become for all the world a window on that future peace when all swords are beaten into plowshares

Everything else can wait. What cannot wait is the search for God, for God's peace.