



Roanoke, Virginia
May 26, 2019

“The Clue for Peace”

Isaiah 2:1-4

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Isaiah 2:1-4 (NRSV)

¹ The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

² In days to come the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. ³ Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

⁴ He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; 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.

Our son, Ben, and his wife, Tori, live in New York City. With full lives and busy work schedules, their visits to Roanoke are limited. That reality was even more profound while we were living in South Carolina. As many of you know, staying knowledgeably engaged in the lives and interests of your grown children can be a challenge. But as a mother and grandmother, I like to know what's important to my children and grandchildren. So I was excited when, on one of those rare visits, Ben and Tori shared their mutual love of the fantasy world inhabited by Starks, Targaryens, and Lannisters; where White Walkers threaten and Rangers of the Night's Watch stand



guard at the Wall; it's the world of Essos and Westeros; the Seven Kingdoms, Winterfell and King's Landing. It is the *Game of Thrones*.

During that visit, my son and his wife were eager to introduce their ignorant mother to this mythic tale that has captured the world's imagination for the past eight years. So eager in fact that Ben persisted for almost an hour in order to get the HBO app on his phone to screen share with our television so that we could watch season one, episode one together.

For those of you who count yourselves among millions of worldwide Throne devotees, you can probably surmise by my poor pronunciation and pathetic introduction that allegiance was not born for me that night. Curiosity—yes. Appreciation for Ben and Tori's passion—certainly. But not enough attraction to justify an HBO subscription. At least not until this week when the world's attention focused on the Game's much anticipated conclusion.

Game of Thrones is seen in 170 countries. It has attracted as many as 23 million viewers for each of its 73 episodes. Some claim that its final season attracted over 44 million viewers per episode when accounting for delayed watching. It has received the most Emmy awards of any primetime series, winning twelve in 2015 alone. Is it *that good*?

Fans would no doubt enter an immediate and resounding yes. It's intelligent, they would say. It offers richly complex story lines with characters whose lives reflect equal complexity. As others have explained: "...save for a handful of truly wicked people, even the best characters are flawed and even the worst have something redeeming."¹

Game of Thrones, fans would say, is truly *that good* because it does what all good science fiction does: it creates an entirely other world that emotionally draws the viewer into its power. In the midst of that other world's dragons and swords; its fire and ice; and its compellingly unpredictable intrigue, we are able to see ourselves. *Game of Thrones* is *that good* because it tells human stories in a fantasy world.

The claim is made with a bit of caution however, for in the midst of all its complexity, *Game of Thrones* is overwhelmingly violent. It presents us with a world where power is absolute and worthy of any means used to attain it. Any means. Your imagination must take over here for I dare not or cannot offer any details. I have not seen the violence—only read descriptions of it. Still, the violence of *Game of Thrones* is so powerfully graphic that it raises profound concerns for many. Why are we drawn to the allure of such violence? What makes us cover our eyes in its presence, yet all the while peeking through our fingers? Does experiencing such violence, even as fiction, make us numb to its savagery and more receptive to its power? Are we prone to pleasure through brutality?

¹ Alice Walton, "Deeper than Swords: Ten Reasons We Are So Hooked on 'Game of Thrones,'" <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alicegwalton/2014/07/08/deeper-than-swords-10-reasons-were-so-addicted-to-game-of-thrones/#19f88ec8238a>



Game of Thrones is based on the as yet incomplete series of novels written by George R.R. Martin. He defends his work by claiming historical authenticity. “I envisioned the world as it was,” he says. It is the medieval world where ruthless power serves as a virtue. Such power is the inescapable means of achieving desired ends. It is what the rich and powerful inevitably do to the poor, the powerless, and the innocent. After all, Martin says, *Game of Thrones* may be a fantasy but it is no fairy tale.

On this Memorial Day weekend when we once again pause to remember and give thanks for all those whose service to our nation ended in brutal reality, we must pause to wonder: is our world so very different from this fantasy world of fire and ice? In our very real world, innocents still suffer, the powerful still abuse the powerless, and walls still divide. In our very real world, far too often unchecked ruthless power still serves as a virtue. In our very real world, it seems impossible to believe that humanity could ever lose its desire for war or its need of it. For as long as humanity craves power, there will be a need to contain it. In our very real world, we wonder: is peace the fairy tale?

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.

The words of the prophet Isaiah are most often heard during the season of Advent when hope seems a bit more tangible. It is the season when we await the coming Prince of Peace as we sing of peace on earth, good will to all. If peace is a fairy tale, then let it be told in the midst of Advent longings and Christmas dreams when we are more prone to wishing upon a star, clutching a glass slipper, or waiting for true love’s first kiss. Perhaps it is good to hear Isaiah in May rather than December.

Isaiah the prophet lived in the city of Jerusalem in the eighth century BC. It was a time when the nation of Judah was threatened by the mighty Assyrian Empire. Yet Isaiah’s words and visions lived on in those who came after him. His school of prophecy continued to speak God’s word when the Assyrian Empire gave way to the Babylonian, and the Babylonian gave way to the Persian. That is because the prophets speak God’s truth in the midst of history—in the midst of a very real world.

In the midst of a nation that knew little relief from the burden of war, that was constantly threatened by the world’s great powers, that knew the vulnerability of weakness, Isaiah saw a nation that would one day lead the world in making peace.

There will come a day, he said, God’s new day when Israel’s holy mountain—the mountain on which God dwells—will be elevated and exalted. The splendor of that sight will draw all the peoples of the world to it. They will gather together in holy pilgrimage. All cultures. All races. All languages.



The powerful and the weak. The rich and the poor. The welcomed and the outcast. The whole and the broken. They desire more than worship. They are seeking to be taught. They are seeking to be transformed. They long to put away the ways of the world and learn how to see and to walk in the ways of God.

When they do, a radical reformation will invade history. There will be a re-equilibrium of priorities. Once the nations have learned to walk in the ways *of* God, they will defer justice *to* God. Gone will be the need for power and retribution. Gone will be envy and the need to justify worth. Gone will be greed and the struggle over limited resources. Gone will be the fear of the other. Gone will be the need for swords. The tools once used to *take life* will be transformed into tools for *sustaining life* for all God's children.

Is Isaiah's vision a fairy tale something we tell our children about a world that will one day be? Or, like any compelling fantasy, is it *a really good story*, one that draws us into its power and makes us partners in its fulfillment? For in the midst of Isaiah's vision lies the ultimate and only clue for peace. It is faithfulness to God's way in the midst of God's world. And what is God's way?

- In the midst of the world's brutality, it is feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and finding shelter for the homeless.
- In the midst of the world's exclusion, it is welcoming the stranger, trusting that the one who has already welcomed us makes room for all.
- In the midst of the world's priorities, it is bearing up the weak and sacrificing for the sake of the lost.
- God's way is walking with those who mourn, especially mindful this day of those whose grief was born within the darkness of human conflict.
- God's way is binding up the wounds of the broken, especially mindful this day of those who still bear the wounds of encountering violence as reality and not fantasy.
- In the midst of all that is broken in God's good world, God's way is being unafraid to ask why.
- It is pledging loyalty to a God who is capable of far more surprising plot twists than even the very best of human fantasy.

But God's amazing clue for peace is far more than simply engaging the act. It means entering the story and finding there the storyteller. I like to call it being partners with God in the re-creation of the world. For with every act of faithfulness, every act of kindness, every act of justice, we find ourselves embraced by the one who is life, and grace, and joy, and peace. No fairy tale, just truth.

Game of Thrones ended last Sunday night; my fascination with it was born in the days since. What began as an idea for a simple sermon illustration turned into hours of research seeking to barely comprehend the rudimentary pieces of the puzzle. I guess I became enthralled with the



story. Will curiosity turn to allegiance? I honestly don't know. I do know that I am intrigued by the way this story ends.

In the *Game of Thrones* penultimate episode, the quest for power reaches savage proportions. The innocents of King's Landing are slaughtered. The one who would claim the Iron Throne meets with death at the hands of her true love. Who then will be king? As those who remain in the ashes of destruction ponder their options, Tyrion—a much maligned but truly wise character—suggests the least likely candidate of all:

"I've had nothing to do but think these past few weeks," he says. "About our bloody history, about the mistakes we've made. What unites people? Armies? Gold? Flags? Stories. There's nothing more powerful in the world than a good story. Nothing can stop it. No enemy can defeat it. And who has a better story than Bran the Broken? The boy who fell from a high tower and lived. He knew he'd never walk again, so he learned to fly. He crossed beyond the Wall, a crippled boy, and became the Three-Eyed Raven. He is our memory, the keeper of all our stories. The wars, weddings, births, massacres, famines. Our triumphs, our defeats, our past. Who better to lead us into the future?"

There is nothing more powerful in the world than a good story. Listen once again to ours:

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.

THANKS BE TO GOD.

