



Roanoke, Virginia
November 29, 2020
First Sunday of Advent

“God’s Promised Day of Hope Can’t Wait”

Part I of the Advent Sermon Series, “What Can’t Wait?”

Isaiah 2:1-5

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The following verses describe the central dream of the book of Isaiah. This vision is paralleled, almost word for word, in the book of Micah, underscoring its importance in the Hebrew faith tradition. Both Micah and Isaiah were prophets in ancient Israel. They spoke on behalf of God to challenge Israel’s complicity with the power structures, the habits, and the values that opposed God’s ways. God wanted God’s people to be a light for all the nations, which meant following God’s instructions and loving what God loves—justice, mercy, and peace. I find reading the prophets especially challenging because they often sound angry, even though their anger is the righteous kind. Immediately preceding this passage, Isaiah tells Israel that God is tired of their festivals and their prayers because their hands are full of blood. They are to repent, learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, and plead for the widow. But then Isaiah shares his vision of a new day, one that is surely coming, and he tells God’s people to begin walking toward it in full anticipation of its arrival.

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

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.
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.
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.
O house of Jacob,
come, let us walk
in the light of the Lord!

Isaiah’s vision—this vision of God’s reign over all the earth—strikes me as a description of the ultimate peaceful transfer of power. I have heard more these past few weeks of the importance of a peaceful transfer of power than ever before. Democracies rise and fall on their leadership’s capacity to relinquish control peacefully to newly elected leadership. This commitment to hand over power is quite extraordinary when you think about it. It’s counter-intuitive especially if you don’t trust the one to whom you transfer that power. Surrender does not come naturally to us, even when our survival depends on it.

In today’s text, the prophet Isaiah describes the ultimate peaceful transfer of power. There will come a day, Isaiah says, when all the nations of the world will surrender their competitive, violent, warring ways in exchange for God’s ways. There will come a day when all of humanity streams to God’s presence to learn God’s instruction and to receive God’s Spirit. There will come a day when humanity’s penchant for power at all costs will be surrendered to the one with whom all power belongs. Nations will give up their warring ways and turn to God as their arbiter, their mediator. A hallmark of this day includes the transformation of weapons of war into farming tools. This day is coming, Isaiah says, so let those who follow God in the present walk toward this future hope.

Hope. On the first Sunday of Advent, Christian tradition guides our gaze toward the future so we can better grasp the implications of our God’s disruptive entrance into a womb in the past. On the first Sunday of Advent, we light a candle for hope. Not any old hope—this candle is lit for eschatological hope—which is a fancy way of saying it is lit for hope anchored in a day that has not



yet arrived but is surely on its way. On the first Sunday of Advent the church proclaims, *before you prepare for the birth of a baby, prepare yourselves for the coming reign of God*. On the first Sunday of Advent we fix our hope on a day when the earth returns to its intended garden state. We light the hope candle for the day when God's home will be fully established among us and we will be fully established within God's home. On that day there will be no more war, all crying and mourning shall cease, and every tear shall be wiped from our eyes, for the first things will have passed away.

Today's Old Testament text envisions a great change in our world. New Testament readings for the first Sunday of Advent locate this change within the second coming of Christ. Some Christian traditions make definitive statements about how and when and where Christ will return. Other traditions ignore the topic completely. But the Second Coming of Christ, the day when the Risen One decisively ends all injustice and triumphs over every evil, is the ultimate hope of our Christian faith. Isaiah gives us a glimpse of what this new day looks like with iconic imagery: swords will be turned into plowshares, and spears into pruning hooks.

If you, like me, are not familiar with farming tools, a plowshare is the sharp edge of a plow. The sharp edge of today's swords will one day be repurposed into tools for feeding people, not harming them. That's Isaiah's vision for God's new day. But notice who turns these implements of war into tools for farming—it is not God, but the people who have chosen to live in God's presence. That's us. If we hope in God's new day, let us understand we play a role in its arrival.

Come, says Isaiah, let us walk in the light of the Lord. Let us turn our swords into plowshares, and our spears into pruning hooks. Let us transform our commitments, our values, and our practices into what brings healing, wholeness, and peace to the world. Let us learn to love what God loves. Hosting and feeding. Removing boundaries. Restoring what is broken. Caring for neighbors. Welcoming strangers. Come, let us understand that the commitments God calls us to are not generic. They are specific, intentional and challenging. They require courage, strength, and a whole-hearted trust in God's commitment to us.

If we are to transform our destructive weapons into instruments that nurture others, we will need to re-examine all of our commitments. From the way our government engages other governments, to the way we live as citizens in our local communities, down to the way we interact with those closest to us. Isaiah's vision of hope includes a commitment from God's people to transform the sharp edges of our self-protective tendencies into a passion for cultivating God's kingdom on earth, as it is in heaven.

Why do we read from Isaiah on the first Sunday of Advent? For Christians, Isaiah's vision of God's new day hinges on the birth of a baby in a stable in Bethlehem 2000 years ago. God's coming to earth—God's incarnation—is the initiation of the final peaceful transfer of power that will end all war. Think about it, all that cosmos-creating power transferred into the body of a helpless and vulnerable baby. The shepherds keeping watch over their flocks that night understood



the great transfer of power initiated by Christ's birth. So did the magi. So did Mary, and her cousin Elizabeth, and all who were watching, and waiting, and hoping for the fulfillment of God's promises. Because the ancient prophecies not only spoke of a coming day. They also spoke of a coming king, a messiah, who would one day bring about an end to all war. King Herod understood this as well. He understood the threat this baby posed toward his power. He responded with a massacre so heinous we rarely include it in our telling of the Christmas story.

Herod understood who Christ was, for Isaiah also prophesied that a child would be born upon whom all authority would ultimately rest. Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Let us understand whom we welcome on Christmas morning. The Prince of Peace is not merely a symbolic title. Jesus entered this world weaponless and left this world weaponless. This was no accident. Christ came to disarm the world by showing us what true dependence on God looks like.

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls,” (Matthew 11:28-29) Jesus told his followers.

“Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord,” Isaiah cried long ago.

Are you weary? Are you carrying heavy burdens? Is your hope for the future laid low? Then come, let us walk together by the light of our hope in what Christ has already accomplished on the cross. In meeting violence with surrender, the power of death was overcome and new life emerged. Through Christ's resurrection God's promised day has already begun, and is ever on its way.

Despite what things may seem—even if it looks like the world is going to hell in a handbasket—Christians throughout the world are this day lighting the candle of hope. But we don't stop at candle lighting. God's coming new day asks something of us—our commitment to a peaceful transfer of power—our willing surrender to the ways of the One whose commitment to us knows no bounds. To walk toward God's presence is to constantly re-examine our commitments against God's commitments. We must learn what it means to beat our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks so we can become the weaponless stewards God created us to be.

Through the power of Christ's resurrection God's reign on earth has already begun. Let's stretch our minds, our hearts, and our arms toward God's coming new day. Come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!

