

Peace in a Land filled with Strife  
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Isaiah 2:1-5  
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In our passage from Isaiah, the prophet offers a beautiful vision for the faithful when they will gather at the mountain of God, beat their swords into plowshares, their spears into pruning hooks; and it will be a time when nation shall not lift up sword against nation, the ways of war will no longer be learned.

Lovely words. But... is such a vision likely to come to pass? In this age of Isis atrocities, terrorist violence, bunker busting bombs and silent drone strikes, is such a peace really possible?

Well, it is good to look for points of light and hope along the journey.

At the top of the hill overlooking the Connecticut Valley and the city of Springfield, Massachusetts stands a group of buildings on a 55-acre campus, with a very long history associated with conflict, violence and war. In fact, for much of the second half of the 1600s this area was the training grounds for the Colonial Militia. Then, in 1789 George Washington, our newly inaugurated President, selected this site for the nation's first arsenal.

For the next 174 years this hill was home to all types of munitions development and storage. That was the legacy of the Springfield Armory.

Then, in the 1960s something remarkable happened... Massachusetts founded its first coeducational technical community college and housed this institution of higher learning on the very site that was once the Springfield Armory. Stockpiles of bombs gave way to stacks of text books. An entire era of war production faded away and in its place grew the enlightened age of the search for deeper knowledge. To herald the change, government leaders encircled the entire 55-acre campus with a 12-foot tall iron fence, cast from the metal of melted down cannons.

Growing up just 5 miles from that hill, Lisa and I knew this campus well. Lisa knew it better than I actually. You see, in May 2006, on the very site that once held the munitions of war for much of the country, Lisa received her degree in nursing, at Springfield Technical Community College. And I know the world is a better place!

"...Neither shall they learn war anymore!"

Well, as lovely a story that it may be, I think you would agree, there is still a long-ways to go.

Today is the start of the Advent season. I believe that our task as followers of the Prince of Peace this Advent season is to point to, and be points of light and hope in a world that has become increasingly cynical and apathetic about the possibility of humankind ever really knowing peace on earth. Advent is that special season in the church: a season of expectation and hope, watching and waiting. Hoping and waiting for the promise of God's peace-filled reign to come, for the good things that were supposed to follow. Christ's coming to finally happen.

In this way, it is really counter-cultural.

Peter Gomes, the former chaplain at Harvard University writes: "Advent is not celebration; it is not the moment for dancing around the light pole. Advent hope is not an exercise in nostalgia or seasonal optimism. Advent hope is not celebration but fortification against the very forces that would drive us to despair and drag us downward. Advent is an exercise in endurance, in preparation for the long journey to a time and place where we have not yet been and for which all of the past and all of the present are mere preparation...Advent hope reminds us that it takes courage to hope in spite of the circumstances, courage to persevere beyond the apparent and the convenient, courage not to be satisfied or dissuaded with our circumstances."

Gomes then adds, "It is the courage not of our convictions, but of our imagination; and perhaps the most courageous thing to do in desperate, disappointing times such as these is to affirm a steadfast hope out of all proportion to what passes for reality."

In the introduction of his book, *The Soul of Politics*, Jim Wallis makes this realistic assessment of the world. "The world isn't working. Things are unraveling, and most of us know it...Bonds of family and community are fraying. Our most basic virtues of civility, responsibility, justice and integrity seem to be collapsing. We appear to be losing the ethics derived from personal commitment, social purpose, and spiritual meaning. The triumph of materialism is hardly questioned now, in any part of our society. Both domestically and globally, we are divided along the lines of race, ethnicity, class, gender, religion, culture and tribe..."

Those words were written in 1994. But sadly, when we turn on the TV and watch the evening news or pick up the morning paper and read the headlines, the world of 2016 is pretty much the same as the world of 1994.

Only today, there is the added burden of our nation recovering from an election season like no other. Did you see the latest poll showing that 85% of our nation believes we are sadly and intensely divided. We live in frightening and dangerous times. Is it any wonder then that so many people have adopted a passive attitude of resignation—accepting the way the world is, as it always has been and ever will be. And so they live with limited expectations of change and only a modest hope for the future.

Long ago, way back to the latter half of the eighth century before Christ was born, Isaiah brought a word from God to his people at a time when that world was darkly shadowed. Israel was

surrounded by enemies on all sides. The nation was under fearful threat of attack and warfare. The once great nation of Israel and the holy city of Jerusalem had fallen into decline. Chaos is not too strong a word for how the world felt to them.

Into the midst of this dark and gloomy situation, Isaiah spoke a promise of what God would do in the future. With the gift of a poet's imagination, he describes a vision of peace, of a world without war. "In the days to come," he wrote, "the nations shall beat their swords into plowshares..."

It is a wonderful and compelling vision.

But is it just wishful thinking? That was almost 3,000 years ago, after all.

The writer Frederick Buechner counters, saying that, "Christianity is mainly wishful thinking." And "sometimes wishing is the wings the truth comes true on."

I think by *wishful*, Buechner means hopeful. For Christianity is more about hopeful thinking, the hope we have in God.

That's what sets hope apart from optimism.

Optimism is a good thing, the attitude that says the sun will come out tomorrow. But hope says that even if the sun remains hidden, for months on end, as we know here in the Pacific Northwest, there will be goodness at work behind the dark clouds, and one day the sun will shine so gloriously that we will see how God has been present all along. Hope faces reality head-on and trusts that God will carry us through.

The problem is though; it is very hard to maintain hope for that which we have waited so long.

We're all familiar with waiting and hoping for things to change aren't we? Some wait for the winds to shift, tides to rise or fortunes to improve. Others wait for ships to come in, health to come back, or reconciliation to come around. Still others wait for peace and justice to win out and racism and sexism will be banished to the shadows of the past.

Isaiah's vision of all nations streaming to the mountain of the Lord together where they will learn war no more may be a glorious vision, but we are far from there, very far.

It is easy to wait while expecting the best. But time has a way of wearing us down so that we wind up, instead, expecting the worst. Our figures of speech give us away. We talk about "waiting for the axe to fall," or "the sky to fall." Then there's that strange and familiar euphemism, "waiting for the other shoe to drop."

Waiting is hard. Hoping is harder the longer we wait.

If we are realistic, as beautiful as the words of Isaiah are about swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, doesn't that vision maybe strike you as impossible? Maybe so. Given history, the prospect of the world at peace does seem unrealistic and impossible.

That is...until it happens, like the peaceful fall of the Berlin Wall, the peaceful end of apartheid in South Africa, the fragile peace in Northern Ireland. Then what has seemed impossible becomes viewed as having been inevitable.

Comments Jim Wallis, "In hindsight we can see how everything fell into place and that it was quite natural, even reasonable, that it would happen. It was inevitable—at least it seems that way in hindsight. Inevitable in hindsight and impossible in foresight...the door of hope always leads from one reality to another."

Our challenge in this season of Advent is to be both hopeful and faithful, even as we are realistic. Hope is the willingness to believe in the inevitable before it even becomes possible, and to live in such a way as to help make the impossible happen.

There is a verse in Proverbs that says, "Where there is no vision, the people perish."

Hope enables us to have the vision to imagine that someday swords will be hammered into plowshares, someday spears will be beaten into pruning hooks, and someday nation shall not lift up sword against nation.

As Peter Gomes suggests, the hope we have in this vision of peace is not so much an act of will, as it is an act of imagination and the courage to persevere.

As Christians we are called to reflect the light and hope that God has for the world. We are called to wait and pray and work for a world that will finally be at peace. We are called to be physicians of the soul in a land that has too often known derision and strife.

People of God, this Advent Season let us walk in the light of our loving God. Better yet, let us BE that light!

Let us pray...

O God, grant us a sense of your hope-filled vision for your creation.  
In this season of short days and long nights,  
of grey and rain and cold,  
teach us the lessons of beginnings;  
that such waitings and endings may be the starting place,  
a planting of seeds which bring to birth what is ready to be born—

something right and just and different,  
a new song, a deeper relationship, a fuller love—  
In the fullness of your time.

O God, grant us the sense of your hope-filled vision... and help us reflect that light of your grace to  
all of your children.

Amen.

Isaiah 2:1-5

<sup>1</sup>The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!