

12-1-19 SERMON CCI ADVENT 1 Isaiah 2: 1-5 Living as Advent People

It's the season of Advent again. Advent gives us four weeks- not to rush around getting ready for Christmas with all the decorations, foods, and gifts... but 4 weeks to slow down and take time to prepare our hearts for Christ's coming. Advent is a reflective time.

I think we need Advent. Looking at recent news: we read of wars and conflicts in many places around the world. On Friday, a terrorist stabbed 5 people in London, and another man stabbed 3 people in the Netherlands. Syrian refugees who fled to Turkey in fear are now being dumped back into Syria with no place to live, no way to protect themselves from the very people they ran away from. Kurdish people feel abandoned by the US because we left them to fight alone. Tariffs are hurting American farmers, people seeking asylum are being turned away at the border, the wealthy got a tax break while services for the poor, elderly, and disabled are being cut from the budget. Mass shootings continue. And that's besides the pending impeachment of the President. Two people I know well are so tired of hearing the conflicts and arguing, they refuse to listen to the news or talk about it anymore. Where do we find peace in a world like this? We need Isaiah's Advent vision.

In today's scripture, the prophet Isaiah spoke to people who were living in a world not so different from our own. Isaiah spoke to people who had been at war over and over, to people who had lost their homes and belongings, had had their land grabbed by mighty foreign armies, their place of worship, the Temple, destroyed, and where the rich got richer while the poor got poorer. Those with enough money got their way in the courts and the poor, the widows and the orphans had little justice. Doesn't this sound like today? In the middle of all this, Isaiah invited them to **see** a different world where the brokenness of war, hatred, and greed gives way to peace and life.

Isaiah saw a vision of a time, when instead of nations coming to Israel to conquer it, to grab Israel's land and take their people as slaves, they would stream to Israel's mountain of Zion to learn the ways of the LORD. Not Jewish people- but goyim, or gentile people like us, people of all nations and races and cultures. People who long for real peace. People who are willing to be taught and learn from God about how to live. People streaming to Zion... a beautiful image. It reminds me of the supposed glory days of the church with people streaming to church each Sunday all dressed up in their Sunday clothes, and stores were closed and no kid's sports games were held on Sundays out of respect for faith. It's the dream of the modern struggling church, isn't it? That people would stream to the church longing for the life God offers, wanting to join our Bible studies and worship services, and small groups, and mission efforts. No need to bribe people to come with free giveaways or special gimmicks. These people **want** to come and learn God's ways.

It's easy to forget that those same glory days of the church also included this: Black people weren't welcome to come streaming to white churches. I still remember the Sunday morning when our pastor told a black family to try the black church down the street rather than welcome them in the door of our church. Even as a teenager, I recognized that was no glory day.

But Isaiah's vision is different than our memories of the glory days of the church. It's a vision of people of all races and nations worshiping together, learning God's ways together, being at peace together. Isaiah's vision will become John's vision in the book of Revelation where John

describes a crowd that no one could count from every nation, tribe, people, and language all singing around the throne of God. Together in one place.

Isaiah's vision also saw a time when nations will come to the mountain of Zion to have their conflicts resolved, when God will settle disputes among the nations. When the ways of God will bring a wisdom that opens the way to peace among the nations. Imagine that for a moment. When wisdom and justice will settle disagreements, not war. Nations won't get away with phony excuses for invading other nations, but will be held accountable. No more war crime courts needed. Peace and safety prevail.

Isaiah's next images are famous around the world. Songs have been written about this text. "Gonna lay down my sword and shield down by the riverside. I ain't gonna study war no more..." Swords and spears were the military weapons of Isaiah's day. Every soldier had his sword or spear sharpened and ready for battle. There were no planes flying overhead destroying whole buildings and killing hundreds at one time. There was no drone fighting where the pilot of the drone sits safely in a room far away from the bombing and devastation he or she causes with their finger strokes on a computer. War with swords and spears was an up-close-and-personal bloody affair. You either killed the other soldier or you died on the field. Isaiah saw a vision of such lasting peace that there would be no need for weapons. So they are melted down and remolded for different use like plowshares and pruning hooks.

A plowshare was the part of a plow that cut the furrow into the ground, turning the soil over, getting it ready to plant seeds. Pruning hooks were used to prune back perennial crops like grapevines and trees so they would produce even more. It was common during times of extreme national crisis, for farming equipment like plowshares and pruning hooks to be gathered up by the army, melted down and reforged into weapons to fight the war. It was the only way to continue to fight in a long, extended war. But Isaiah described the opposite happening: they would beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. The tools and technologies of war and death would be melted down and remolded into life-giving tools of peace and nourishment. No more universities and boot camps training soldiers for war. Ain't gonna study war no more. Sounds good, doesn't it?

But is it realistic to imagine such a thing in the world in which we live? To let go of our weapons and stop preparing for war? It sounds like Jesus' call for his disciples to "turn the other cheek." Don't fight back. It's hard enough to turn the other cheek on a personal level, but is that a realistic foreign policy for a nation- to turn the other cheek? Isn't our national security based on having a military that has studied and prepared for war better than any other nation? Yet after WW2, with the devastation in Japan from America's dropping nuclear bombs there, serious talks took place with the Soviet Union about jointly dismantling our nuclear missiles. A hopeful peak at Isaiah's peace took place. No one wanted to see nuclear missiles used again. But the question was... what would happen if, in the name of peace, **we** dismantled our nuclear weapons over here- if we beat them into plowshares- and then Russia reneged? Could we really take that kind of risk as a nation? So we laid down some of our swords and shields, but we did not reforge them into tools of peace; we still keep them and our war training universities ready just in case. There has rarely been a time in my lifetime when this nation has not been at war somewhere.

Yet Isaiah's vision remains compelling. In fact, Isaiah's vision was the basis for this huge sculpture that sits in a garden at the United Nations in New York. It was given to the United Nations by the Soviet Union in 1959, a country we were not at peace with. Yet the sculptor recognized that Isaiah's image of peace was what the world needed. And to make sure everyone gets the message, Isaiah's words are right next to it.

Isaiah's ancient vision of swords being beaten into plowshares calls to us again this Advent because that vision has still not come to pass. So what do we do in the meantime? Isaiah says to "Walk in the light of the LORD," not just some day, but now while we wait. To not be passive in our waiting, but to actively live in the light of the LORD. Living in ways that stand for justice and bring real peace. Speaking about the peace that comes, not from being the best at war, or by having the most money, but based on justice and truth and equity for all people. Living in the light. Jesus said it a different way, "You are the light of the world. Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven." What can we do as Advent people? Be a light when the conversation turns ugly. Don't turn off the news and hide, be a light. The thing about light though, is that you don't always need a huge, glaring, spotlight to light the way; even a small gentle light dispels darkness and exposes what is hidden. So let your little light shine. As a church, join your little lights together with others and speak for peace and justice. Let's not let those in power trample on those with no power- at our borders, in our cities, or around the world. Our world needs the light of people of faith.

On a personal level, where can we bring light this Advent? I am reminded that is easy to use our words as weapons to strike back or to get our way. Or perhaps we're the quiet type and instead of hurtful words, we speak through our stony silence and cold shoulders. Isaiah calls God's people to walk in the light of the Lord instead. The next time we hear what seem to be unkind words and we want to react in kind, what if we pause and speak words of peace and understanding instead? I'm speaking to myself here.

Isaiah invites us to put our weapons away, and walk in the light of the Lord. Because we've caught a vision of the world of peace and justice we were created for and we follow Jesus who showed us how to walk in the light even when others don't... even the dark hatred of the cross didn't stop Jesus from walking in the light. As the hymn Duane played for us invited us, let's turn our eyes upon Jesus. He's the Savior we are waiting for this Advent. May we prepare our hearts and walk in the light until he comes.

PRAYER

Lord, we want to walk in your light this Advent. Shine your light within us today and show us the weapons we need to lay down- weapons we've grown used to carrying. You know where we have hurt others, where we have been unwilling to bend and forgive, slow to admit we were wrong. Forgive us, Lord, and prepare the way before us as we go and make peace with those with whom we are at odds. Help us walk in your light this season.