

“What Isaiah Saw”
by Rev. Meghan Davis
Based on Isaiah 2: 1-5 (and Matthew 24: 36-44)
Longview Presbyterian Church—November 28, 2010

Today is the first Sunday in Advent, and since Advent begins the new liturgical year, Happy New (Liturgical) Year! The season of Advent leads to Christmas is meant to prepare us for the coming of the Christ. But Advent is not only about preparing for the birth of the Baby Jesus but also about preparing for the Second Coming of Christ because without the life, teaching, death and resurrection and ultimate second coming of Christ, the birth of Christ is little more than a good story.

Today’s texts, like those for every first Sunday of Advent, focus on preparation and the Second Coming. The Gospel lesson from Matthew is about being on our toes, ready for the coming of the Messiah because we don’t know just when it is going to come (nothing like a good apocalyptic scriptural text to get us in the mood for Christmas). The Isaiah text gives us a glimpse into what the reign of Christ will look like. The first Sunday of Advent texts remind me of the bumper sticker: Jesus is coming, look busy. Of course, we’re not only supposed to *look* busy, we’re supposed to actually *be* busy. We’re supposed to be preparing for the coming of the Messiah full of the excitement, joy, and anticipation of a young child looking forward to Christmas. With the same spirit we anticipate the coming of Christ, the Reign of Christ coming to fulfillment like cleaning house for a beloved guest coming for a visit. I don’t know about you, but while I’m no fan of housework, the anticipation of a guest’s visit makes cleaning up for guests kind of enjoyable.

While we, and the vast majority of Americans prepare our homes for Christmas and whittle away at our shopping lists, as faithful Christians we are called to a deeper preparation, a preparation of our hearts, souls and lives for Christ. It’s oh so tempting for preachers (such as myself) to take aim at the outrageous materialism and commercialization of this precious holy day but as Rev. Stacey Simpson Duke notes, “Yes, our culture is celebrating a giddy overhyped pseudo-Christmas while we are attempting the more serious task of observing a holy Advent, but the reason the cultural messages are so powerful is that our human yearning is so real, and so profound.”¹ She goes on to ask, “How might the nostalgia for Christmases past, and the idolization of childhood wonder represent our desire to believe again in things that seem impossible to us as adults—like peace on earth and goodwill for all?”² How do we as Christians address this profound yearning? How do we rediscover the wonder and magic of our childhood Christmases? TV ads would suggest that that we can access that childhood exhilaration of Christmas with extravagant Christmas presents and the approximately thirteen million Americans who are still paying off last year’s holiday spending must have bought into the suggestion that spending money on gifts, whether or not we can afford them, is the only way to show our love. I hope we all can agree, on an intellectual

¹ Stacey Simpson Duke, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 1 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 2.

² *Ibid*, 4.

level at least, that the yearning will not be satisfied with the gifts we buy. How then do we as Christians prepare for the coming of Christ? Today's Isaiah passage gives us some hints.

This passage, sometimes called the “floating oracle of peace” because it also appears in Micah (4:1-3), gives us Isaiah's vision of the word of God, a vision of the reign of God in which adversity will cease, God will settle arguments, peace and justice will prevail and the instruments of war will be transformed into instruments of agriculture. The text tells us that the prophet Isaiah saw the word. We're accustomed to reading the word of God in the Bible or hearing the word of God in proclamation, but how often do we *see* the word of God? Or think of the word of God as being something that even can be seen? But Isaiah saw the word and what he saw was a vision of all people coming together to worship God and learn God's ways, to follow God's paths of justice, peace and fullness of life. This “floating oracle of peace” and others like it proclaimed by the prophets brought hope where there was no hope, light where there was only darkness. As one scholar notes, “Presumably this is especially important in times of difficulty when present circumstances seem unpromising; confidence that the future belongs to God gives hope in the present.... Every generation needs assurance that the powers of the world—whether the Romans of Jesus' time or the principalities and powers of our present age—do not determine the future.”³ When we look at current events including but by no means limited to the economic situation, environmental concerns, terrorist threats, it seems that now is certainly such a time of difficulty and the present circumstances are unpromising, so now is certainly a time to gain confidence in the knowledge that the future belongs to God.

The vision Isaiah has of God's future and for the children of God begins with a mountain, and not just any mountain but Zion, the mountain of God's house which will be established as the highest of the mountains, raised above the hills and all nations will stream to it. The mountain is the highest mountain but it is not high for safety or military advantage but for God's glory. And while “highest” can have a connotation of “best” the height also gives the impression of being closer to God. One way for us to prepare for the coming of Christ is to bring this highest mountain into our hearts, souls and lives; to make our hearts a place closer to God through our prayer, worship and other spiritual practices. We also prepare for Christ by living lives recognizable as holy—in the sense of good and true.

Isaiah's vision is fully inclusive for all God's children—all races, all ethnicities, all languages, all cultures—to come together to walk in the light of God, learning God's way of shalom: peace, justice, and bountiful living. The text says that people from all the nations will stream to Zion, God's mountain. The Hebrew word translated here as “stream” means not only to “flow like a river” but also to “shine in joyful radiance” and it makes sense that the peoples of all the nations would both stream to God as a river flows and shine in joyful radiance as they do so. Anthea Portier-Young, an Old Testament professor at Duke Divinity School notes, “As they move toward the center, the nations

³ Bruce C. Birch, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 1 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 3.

will be in flux, transformed as they draw closer to God. In their transformation they will become fresh, sustained, and a source of life and growth for the earth. We also see their joy and light as they celebrate divine presence on earth and receive, reflect, and radiate the light of God.”⁴ Isaiah’s vision is for all the nations and many peoples of the world to be drawn to the highest mountain saying, “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.” They will come wishing to learn about God and know the grace and peace of God, seeking God’s guidance in their lives. We are called to be among the shining, joyfully radiant crowd. We are called to seek God’s guidance and learn to walk in God’s paths.

We come to the most familiar part of today’s passage, “[God] 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.” (For those of you, like me, who have a hard time remembering exactly what a plowshare is, it’s the blade of the plow.) The first sound of advent is ringing; not the ringing of silver, jingle, Salvation Army or any other kind of bells, but the clang, clang, clang ringing of anvil on metal—the ringing of swords being beaten into plowshares. This transformation has been beautifully defined as, “The swords of hate, revenge, and enmity will be transformed into shovels of productivity and creativity, ‘their spears into pruning hooks.’ God will turn hostility into hospitality, grief into grace, haunts into hopes, duels into duets, pain into gain, fear into faith, collisions into coalition, breakdowns into breakthrough.”⁵

Perhaps you are familiar with some ways in which instruments of war have been literally transformed into instruments of peace such as projects in countries torn apart by civil war in which bullet shells are transformed into jewelry and sold to support the work of peace in those very countries. St. Louis University has a small chapel in which bomb shells have been converted into light fixtures by which people pray and seek God’s guidance in their lives.⁶ While these methods of beating swords into plowshares are symbolically important, they are by no means the only ways of walking in God’s paths toward peace and justice. But in a week that brought us military action between North and South Korea and thwarted terrorist bombing attack frighteningly close to home in Portland, not to mention the ongoing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and a seemingly endless list violence in homes, schools and nations throughout the world, this text can be a little hard to swallow. It seems naïve, or even sadly, ironically, comical. It can seem like a promise that we can’t even imagine coming to fruition; at least, not in our lifetimes.

Rev. Stacy Simpson Duke notes, “It is so much easier to pin our hopes on Christmas gifts and holiday feasts than it is to open ourselves to the possibility of

⁴ Anatheia Portier-Young, “Isaiah 2: 1-5 Commentary on the First Reading for November 28, 2010” at workingpreacher.org

⁵ Benoni Silva-Netto, “Places of Holy Majesty,” *The Upper Room Disciplines 2007* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2006), 343.

⁶ Paul Simpson Duke, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 1 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 7.

believing in the seemingly impossible.”⁷ But this seemingly impossible vision of the world is exactly what Isaiah sees and is the reality in which we are called to participate. In the past, I’ve thought of this vision of peace as being something that will be miraculously handed down to us by God and afterwards, life will be easy, conflict free and we’ll be lounging around in a state of bliss, much like vision of the Peaceable Kingdom with the lions and lambs lying together. But it occurs to me that when Isaiah mentions that people will be beating swords into plowshares, this is not easy work. It will take hard work to change from one mode of life to another, just as it takes hard work to transform a sword into a plowshare, a spear into a pruning hook it is hard work to farm the land and feed people. Isaiah’s vision is not one of replacing work with the easy life. It is a vision of working together in ways that are life giving rather than life taking, community building rather than community destroying. And *we are called* to do this hard work. In this passage, the only active verbs for God are “judge” and “arbitrate.” That’s what God’s going to do to bring justice. But we are called to do the rest. We are called to learn God’s ways, walk in God’s paths, beat swords into plowshares, and use those plowshares to provide for God’s children.

The passage concludes with Isaiah’s invitation, “come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!” Light is extremely important throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. In Job and the Psalms light is life, goodness, joy, revelation and truth. And elsewhere in the book of Isaiah light is linked with justice and righteousness, the promise of salvation and healing.⁸ And it’s no coincidence that as we prepare for the coming of the Christ in Advent, our symbol for the season is light. As we light the Advent candles adding a new candle each week, we do so in hope, faith and trust that God’s light will overpower the darkness of the world. We do so in hope, faith and trust that the day will come when all the nations will walk in God’s light and follow God’s paths and teaching. We light the candles, not only as a sign of our hope and belief that the day will come when swords will be beaten into plowshares but we do so to light our way to embolden ourselves in the work of beating the swords ourselves. We do so knowing that we are not waiting for some far off time when God will make it happen, but we are doing our own part to bring about the day of peace here and now. We do so with the joy and anticipation of a young child at Christmas knowing that though it may seem more likely for eight flying reindeer to bring a jolly old elf to our house with gifts delivered through the chimney than for nations to cease to learn war, we know that this is the reign of Christ which has been promised and in which we participate.

We prepare for the coming of Christ by participating in the Reign of Christ breaking through into our reality. We beat swords into plowshares by living as though the Reign of Christ is already realized. By the way we spend our time, by the way we help others, by the way we spend our money. We can’t bring about the reign of Christ on our own, regardless of our actions, ultimately, that’s God’s job. But until that time, we

⁷ Stacey Simpson Duke, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 1 (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 6.

⁸ Anatheia Portier-Young, “Isaiah 2: 1-5 Commentary on the First Reading for November 28, 2010” at workingpreacher.org [light is life (Job 17:1; 18:5, 18; 33:28, 30), goodness (Job 30:26), joy (Psalm 97:11), revelation and truth (Job 12:22; Psalm 43:3), justice and righteousness (Isaiah 59:9) and the promise of salvation (Isaiah 49:6) and healing (Isaiah 58:8).]

are called to work toward that Reign of Christ, to believe it will come, live like it is already here, to learn war no more. To prepare for the coming of the Christ the prophet Isaiah invites us to walk in the light of the Lord.