

“Swords into Plowshares”

Valley Presbyterian Church – November 20, 2022

Christ the King / Reign of Christ

Isaiah 36:1-3, 13-20

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Isaiah 37:1-7, 2:1-4

Introduction

In our first reading today, from Isaiah, chapter 36, you heard the story of a powerful foreign king, Sennacherib of Assyria, who – through his aide, the Rabshakeh – tries to scare Hezekiah, the king of Judah, and his people. These foreign invaders will try to talk the people out of trusting their God, and then prove his might with his path of destruction.

Everyone in Jerusalem knows what had happened to their neighbors. The Assyrian army had swallowed up other nations in the area, including the northern kingdom of Israel, Samaria, whose people were scattered and relocated. Now, they have reached the Judean town of Lachish, only a couple days walk from Jerusalem.

Read Isaiah 37:1-7, 2:1-4

The narrative account in Isaiah 36-37 is permeated with brute power and force. Assyria, the superpower of their day, has destroyed everything in its path and now stands at the door of Jerusalem, threatening the same fate. The king sends his emissary, along with his great army, to meet with Hezekiah and deliver the following message to the people of Judah.

Don't let the king lead you to believe that he, or his God, will be able to save you, Forget about all those beautiful, but empty, promises that God will protect you. Like all the other gods of your neighboring nations, your God is powerless. Instead, pledge allegiance to the king of Assyria. He promises you a life of peace and prosperity, Who wouldn't want to eat from their own vine and drink from their own cistern? You can do this under our rule, until the day we move you to another country, which is just like your own, where there will also be bread and wine, grains and vineyards.

The sole purpose of the message from the Rabshakeh is to intimidate and instill fear in the people, encouraging them to turn their back on the king, forsake their God, and bow before the Emperor. It provides a classic set-up between a bully and a faithful agent of God. In his response, King Hezekiah engages in mourning rituals: tearing his clothes, covering himself with sackcloth, and finding solace in the house of the Lord. His anguish is clear in the message his officials deliver to the prophet Isaiah: “This is a day of distress, of rebuke, and of disgrace; children have come to the birth, and there is no strength to bring them forth.” (37:3)

Isaiah sends the following words of comfort to King Hezekiah: “Thus says the Lord, do not be afraid.” (37:5) Do not fear the words that have been spoken whose sole purpose is to intimidate, to instill fear in those who hear them. Do not fear the words that mock and attack your authority and belief in God. Isaiah furthermore promises that God will cause the Assyrians to retreat and return to their own land, where the king will meet his end; suggesting what we all know too well: *you live by the sword, you die by the sword.*¹

This narrative account in Isaiah 36-37 is so steeped in violence and war that it seems as if the creators of the lectionary could not let the text stand on its own; instead drawing our attention to some other words by the prophet Isaiah in his vision of peace found in chapter 2. Following the context of domination and force in chapters 36-37, these final words hold up an alternative vision: of a world where nations will learn war no more, where people are more concerned with cultivating food than producing the weapons that then – as now – cause so much destruction.

Within this vision, God is no longer seen as a mighty warrior to fight other nations, but rather, God is seeking peace and justice; a righteous arbitrator teaching nations how to live together, how to share resources, how to find non-violent resolutions to disputes. The purpose of these lessons in peace-making and peace-keeping is that everyone may live well. It also serves as a counter-claim to the words of the Assyrian emissary whose pretend claims of peace and prosperity would last only until the conquerors chose to exert their power and take the people away in exile.

What Isaiah sees is not taking place now, but “in the days to come.” (2:2) People of every nation will stream to Mt. Zion, including those who were the enemies of Israel. God’s instruction will go forth from Jerusalem; God will judge

¹ Barbara Lundblad from *WorkingPreacher.com*

between the nations; the people will be so transformed by this teaching that there will be no more need to be afraid.

There are so many voices in our world eager to convince us to *Be afraid! Be very afraid!* Fear can motivate people to spend money on things they don't need, to vote for a particular party, or to lash out at the faceless *other*. Tyrants have known for many centuries that if you want to control people, make them afraid. Fear may be the strongest motivation humans know, except for love.

Fear can even colonize our consciousness; when it does, we do the fear-mongers work for them, internalizing a voice that repeats, *Be very afraid!* You can make your own list of internal voices: fear about money or jobs or safety or health. Fear about marriage and kids and schools. Internalized fear can convince us that our security lies somewhere other than with God.

King Hezekiah says, in the message sent to Isaiah, that “children have come to the birth, and there is no strength to bring them forth.” Something good is waiting to come into the world, but the people are too fearful, too exhausted, to carry it through. In the face of all the obstacles ahead of us, we may feel we don't have the strength to bring about a good outcome.² The loudest voices – screaming *Be afraid!* – often demand our attention, dominate our awareness, and banish our trust in God to a distant whisper.

But, *the world is going to hell in a handbasket!* is not a Christian vision for the world. It does not witness to faith in a God who has delivered God's people from bondage, demonstrated divine love in the Word made flesh, and announced the renewal of all things. Living unexamined lives of internalized fear, as the invading Assyrians hope that the people of Israel will do, is not a Christian witness. Instead, the world hungers for us to witness to the “love that casts out fear.” (I John 4:18)³

“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.” (2:4) Here is the teaching – the Torah, the divine word – that is spoken through Isaiah. War is abolished. No longer will our sons and daughters be trained to die and kill others; they will have no weapons with which to do such horrible things. All they will seek to do is reap the grain and prune the trees of the land. “In the days to come,” (2:1) the promise goes, war and its propaganda will disappear

² Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, *Bible Worm Podcast*

³ Amy Oden from *WorkingPreacher.com*

from their minds. Instead, they will walk in God's light, following God's teachings, rejecting violence for the ways of peace. Shalom is not the mere absence of war, but is oneness, wholeness: a vision of designed unity where God makes possible the existence, and co-existence, of us all on earth.⁴

Imagine a world where we don't need to worry about who is in power; where we are not subject to the manipulation of fear and war's propaganda. Imagine what space that would open up to us to focus on what is being birthed in our midst. As the liturgical calendar turns from the end of one Christian year to the beginning of another next week, on the first Sunday of Advent, we turn our attention again to birth, to the Word made flesh, to God's entry into the world as an infant and a savior, both human and divine.

What if, in the days to come, we could learn from this God how to live together, seeking common good instead of manipulative power? What if, instead of getting exhausted by fear, we could ground ourselves in hope, which – in turn – would give us strength for the living of this day? What if all the energy that currently went into crafting and wielding weapons of war could be re-allocated? In what new ways would people's fears be relieved, and lives sustained?

In these final verses, Isaiah draws attention away from the gaze on military might and toward the reign of God. Jerusalem is no longer seen as a beleaguered city under threat, but the center of life-giving teaching, life's flourishing, and a common source of light for all people. When our gaze is allowed to shift from the horizon of fear to a vision of hope, trust in God can grow deep roots to sustain us in life.

On this Reign of Christ Sunday, as we await Advent's dawn, let us believe that our God is coming, that the time for birth is growing near, and proclaim the hope that in God's reign of peace, swords are beaten into sickles, guns are melted down and hammered into shovels, and our daughters and sons will indeed learn about war no more. Amen.

⁴ John Holbert, "Real Peace" from *Patheos.com*