

November 20, 2022 – THIS DAY’S SERMON - Reign of Christ

Readings: Isaiah 36:1-2, 13-14, 15-18a; 37:1-7; 2:1-4 – Matthew 5:14

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Let us pray: *God of deliverance, you promised prosperity and peace to your exiled children. Grant us to prosper in this place and time, not for riches, but for faith, so that our lives might be a blessing to those around us. We pray these things in the name of Jesus the Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.*

Let’s be honest ... it is difficult, if not impossible, to hear the word of Isaiah this morning without having some sense of the heat King Hezekiah felt on the back of his neck in hearing the words of the king of Assyria; words which threaten not only Hezekiah’s own power, but words which tempt the people with freedom and abundance and independence ... if they will but turn **from** Hezekiah and the God who leads him **to** trust in another.

Living today – in such a time as this – a time of both national and global conflict – our imaginations do not have to be stretched far to resonate with the fears and doubts that prompt King Hezekiah to turn to God’s Prophet Isaiah.

From a sense of distress and helplessness, Hezekiah turns to one he knows to be a voice of God to seek the power of prayer. Hmm ... might that be something like our own response to the stress and distress we encounter in our lives when we seek guidance through our Prayer Chain; the place **we** can turn to when needing the power of prayer that cries out to the God who promises to hear?

It felt ironic as I sat on Tuesday, reading Isaiah’s “poem” which invites us to join God’s people in going up to the mountain of the Lord for his teaching so that we might learn from the ways our God and walk in his path.

Isaiah goes on to describe God as one who would sit as judge to settle our differences. In the end, Isaiah tells us, it’s not God who will do the work of bringing peace. It’s **us**. **We** will be the ones who will cease lifting up our swords against one another, giving up the practice of teaching war as a way of life.

While swords and spears seem relatively cheap today, in the time of Isaiah, their production diverted significant resources. The simple transformation of swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks would represent the diversion of tools of destruction to tools that provide food for the masses.

This word of Isaiah came to me on Tuesday as I listened with a sense of irony to the news that a Russian-made missile had fallen in Poland, killing two people. The irony comes in that as the word of Isaiah spoke of turning swords and spears into plowshares, the two people who died were engaging in their work as farm laborers, with farm implements around them.

It’s hard to imagine there being any power in the words of a prophet spoken nearly three millennia ago. And, yet, here we are, reading a text that continues, some 2700 years later, to evoke reflection – reflection regarding the future reign of God; reflection on international politics; reflection on war; reflection on the hungry – the poor; and, yes, reflections on peace.

Into this time and place, God speaks through the words of Isaiah which come to us not as wishful thinking nor a prediction, but as an affirmation that history will, indeed, reach its goal. That goal – the reign of God – will involve a radical transformation of the conditions in which God’s people currently live, from nationalism and conflict to unity and peace. It feels hard to imagine – hard to believe – right now, doesn’t it?

But what happens when we hear these words as a proclamation that the future is God’s? How does this feel different to us when we understand that this isn’t a summons to us to bring in the new age, but, rather, a promise that God will?

To be sure, we are called to take part in this new age by responding to the word of God that calls us here this morning; to seek after this instruction that Isaiah speaks of and to follow it. It is **that instruction**, when followed, that will change our hearts and result in us laying down our swords and spears; turning us away from war and toward the work of nourishing the spirits and bodies of others.

It is in this that we are invited to participate: God’s work, our hands; because **this** is what we do with the good news of God’s reign in **every** age: We gather to hear, to participate, to respond.

While this poetic word of Isaiah is set in a specific time and place, the time of the transformation of which it speaks is never specified. The announcement of Isaiah is concrete. It is not some mythical vision of peace, but one that invites everyone who hears it to see God’s reign breaking forth in the concrete realities of our everyday lives. And any action that moves us in the direction of peace with justice can be recognized as a sign of that reign.

God – Yahweh – sits in this text not as king or ruler, but as a teacher, a judge, an arbitrator. This is not the typical prophetic image of the Lord as the judge who metes out punishment after a finding of guilt. The divine judge from the word that came to Isaiah is one who influences disputes among nations, who guides resolution to their conflicts so that peace can be established and maintained.

As a result, those who respond to this vision of peace will seek to become peace makers, not accusing individuals or nations, but acting as mediators and arbitrators among them.

This vision of international relations is universal in the expectation that all nations will come to know the one true God and that the result will be peace. While the nations of which Isaiah speaks are unnamed, they are, nonetheless, real nations.

The prophetic word spoken by Isaiah realistically expects conflicts, differences, and competing claims to continue. The difference in the new age is that they will be resolved peacefully. That can only happen when there are commonly accepted principles that transcend or supersede individual or national self interest. To be sure, peace requires compromise ... *even – and perhaps most especially – in the reign of God.*

With all that said, it is easy to write off this text as either unrealistic or as applying to an era beyond history, but not within it. It seems unrealistic to expect peace among all nations in the immediate future.

This poetic affirmation confronts us with the assurance that God will one day reign — in peace. Hearing these words from Isaiah today has the power to evoke expectation; to kindle hope. It begs the question, what does it *mean* ... what does it mean to kindle hope? What does it *take* to kindle hope?

We are both witnesses to and participants in the kindling of that hope this morning as we celebrate the baptism of little Lyla Rey. Michael and Melissa have come to this place of God's Word, bringing with them Lyla and her big sister, Ava, and their family, joining us here, in a desire to learn God's ways and walk in his paths. One step, seemingly small, when taken in concert with those that have come before it and alongside it, builds a pathway towards the peace that God desires for His world.

The reality is, even as we visualize it and hope for it, international peace may not come in our lifetime. Wishing and praying will not necessarily make it happen; but it certainly will not come unless we imagine it; unless we believe and articulate the vision that God wills the end of war.

In light of what occurred Tuesday on the world stage, I think we can believe and articulate that vision. At a time when all the world is holding its breath to see what Putin will do next, how easy would it have been to look at a Russian-made missile that killed two innocent farm laborers in a NATO country and take a swift and aggressive response?

While the Hebrew word for “peace”, which is *shalom*, does not appear in Isaiah's vision of the world without war this morning, it *is* encapsulated in the promise we find in it. Beyond the absence of military conflict, there will be a resolution of conflicts – justice – based on God's vision of justice. A major economic shift will also occur.

But what actually occurred was a measured consideration – a refusal to jump to conclusions. That must kindle hope in you. It certainly does in me. We cannot discount the fact that Isaiah's prophetic words continue today. We know it because here we are, gathered together this morning in this “house of God”.

We have come up to what serves as the mountain of the Lord this morning to hear God's teaching so that we might walk in His ways. We are invited this morning to consider what swords we might be wielding in our own lives that serve as weapons of war rather than plowshares of peace.

Maybe it is religious or political intolerance. I know there is plenty of that going around these days. Maybe it is something from our past, a sword we are holding against ourselves that prevents us from living fully and freely as beloved, forgiven children of God.

I invite you today to consider the swords in your own lives and to imagine what it would take to allow God to begin to shape it – to transform it – into an instrument that will nourish your spirit and the spirits of those around you. Ultimately, this is the spirit found throughout the world that waits for peace.

We *are* the light of the world of which Jesus speaks this morning; not a secret society which shields itself from the world, but a city set on a hill whose authentic life cannot be concealed. We do not generate this light ourselves. We are the recipients of a light from which God is the source – lit not for our own sakes, but for the sake of the world. This ... *this* is what it means to “kindle hope” for us, our neighbors, and the world.

Amen.