

First Sunday of Advent – 2007

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast
Olentangy Christian Reformed Church
Columbus, Ohio
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Isaiah 2:1-5

Amoz's son Isaiah saw this word about Judah and Jerusalem:

In the days to come the mountain of the LORD's house will stand firm as the highest mountain; it will tower over the hills. All peoples will stream to it; many nations will come. They will say, "Come! Let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, and we will walk in his paths."

Torah will go forth from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He will judge between the nations, and he will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into iron plow points and their spears into vine-dressing knives. One nation will not raise a sword against another, and they will no longer train for war.

Come, house of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the LORD.

Sermon

Ah, Jerusalem!

According to Old Testament interpreter Walter Brueggemann, in the time of Isaiah "the city of Jerusalem . . . was a marginal and vulnerable operation. Jerusalem lived and flourished, or suffered, at the behest of the great powers." Judah and Jerusalem were, and still are, a geographic and political crossroads, a crossroads that often witnessed and often suffered from the collision of empires.

One empire after another overran Judah and Jerusalem. Daniel saw these empires as great beasts, rising from the churning and chaotic waters of the sea. War was a spectator sport for Judah and Jerusalem, as the empires clashed. War was a way of life, and of death. The slaughter tottered the empires, one after another. And the slaughter foretold a bleak future, if any future at all, for Judah and Jerusalem.

But Isaiah had a vision. He saw an unexpected future for Judah and Jerusalem.

Actually, the vision was larger than Jerusalem, larger than Judah. The vision concerned "all peoples"; it concerned "all nations." Isaiah's vision was universal. It was longer, it was wider, it was deeper, it was higher than the boldest dream. Representatives from forty nations gathered in Annapolis, Maryland, last week. Isaiah's vision is bigger! Representatives of one hundred ninety-two nations assemble at the UN. Isaiah's vision is deeper!

And it's a vision of justice and peace. Throughout human history, the default method for settling disputes has been violence. Diplomacy is tried. Sometimes it works, for a while. But even when we speak softly, we carry sticks. And the bigger the stick the better. War and the threat of war remain powerful tools in the affairs of nations. We acknowledge war as a necessary evil, though we acknowledge the necessity of war more readily than the evil of it. And so we wage war, and we threaten war. We wear the mantle of "War President." We label "occupations" as "wars," because we're the good guys, and "wars" are never our fault.

Isaiah sees a world without war, a world in which disputes are settled without resort to violence, without resort to the threat of violence. Isaiah sees a world in which the military-industrial-educational complex — yes, the university, too, is deeply implicated — unravels. No more military academies and war colleges. No more defense contractors and private armies. No more professional soldiers. No more ten-year-olds with AK-47s.

In the last few years, we have been seeing black flags and banners again. “POW/MIA,” they say. For some reason, there has been a resurgence of interest in the fate of soldiers captured in war or otherwise unaccounted for. On the banner are these words: “You are not forgotten.” But the time is coming, Isaiah sees, when we will forget. Not that we will forget those who have suffered and died, those whose hearts and lives have been torn apart by war. But the time is coming, he sees, when we will forget how to make war. We will forget how to make missiles and mortars and mines. We will forget how to torture captives and prisoners. (I’m ashamed of my country and its leaders on this score!) We will forget how to dance on the graves of our enemies.

That’s Isaiah’s vision, and it’s big, bigger than Judah and Jerusalem. It’s bigger than all our experience, bigger than all our dreams, bigger than our imagination.

Yet within that big vision lies a sharp, clear center. There is a sculpture at the UN that depicts a well-muscled man hammering out a transformation. On the base of the sculpture are these words: “We shall beat our swords into ploughshares.” But something is missing from this picture. One hundred ninety-two nations are gathered. The hammer strikes again and again. A new future is emerging. But the center is missing. Isaiah’s center is missing.

Judah is at the center of Isaiah’s vision. And at the center of Judah is Jerusalem. And at the center of Jerusalem is Mt. Zion. And at the top of Mt. Zion is the LORD’s house. And at the LORD’s house is Torah. At the LORD’s house is instruction for life. At the LORD’s house is justice for the nations. At the LORD’s house is arbitration among the peoples.

There will be peace, when all peoples come to the LORD, and the LORD is teaching them. There will be peace, when the LORD himself is settling disputes with perfect justice. There will be peace, when the LORD makes a new covenant — not with Torah being given at Mt. Sinai, but with Torah going forth from Mt. Zion — a new covenant with all peoples. There will be peace “in the days to come.” Somehow. Some time. When something happens in Jerusalem. When the temple of the LORD, the LORD’s living presence, is lifted up. When the LORD’s living presence is lifted up, on a cross perhaps, drawing all people near. There will be peace. Somehow. Some time. When the word goes out, making disciples of all nations, making for peace with God, making for peace with one another in some limited way at least, a foretaste, a glimpse, of the peace to come.

No, the peace we dream of, the peace Isaiah saw, is not here yet, not by a longshot. We are in the midst of two wars (or “occupations,” if we want to fuss over words), within a larger war (so-called), while we are contemplating a third war! Meanwhile wars grip other nations and tear other peoples apart. So, no, the peace is not here yet.

Those ancient swords were to be beaten into iron plow points because iron was expensive. It was too valuable merely to discard. But today we find ourselves mortgaging the future in order to pay for wars and weapons that we can’t afford. So, no, the peace is not here yet.

What then?

“Come, house of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the LORD.” That’s what the prophet said. While Israel waited for the nations to learn and to live by Torah, Israel itself was to live by the LORD’s instruction. While Israel waited for the nations to learn and to live by the ways of peace, Israel itself was to trust no nation, trust no ally, trust no warrior, trust no weapon for its security, but to trust the LORD and the LORD alone.

There may be times to take up the sword. There is, after all, a time for war as well as for peace (cp. Ecclesiastes 3:8). But those who live by the sword shall die by the sword (cp. Matthew 26:52). And so the sword should be taken up only as a last resort and only with great sorrow. And the sword should not ever become a way of life, or an idol that is honored as a source of security or, in a perverse twist, as a source of peace. Pity the people who practice perpetual war!

And for us? Isaiah sees a future that the Lord, not his people, that the Lord, not the nations – a future that the Lord himself will bring about. Our calling is to embrace that future and, while we wait, to embody it as best we can. Because we are the body of Christ, and he is the Prince of Peace.