

FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH
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DECEMBER 4, 2011

SERMON: PLOWSHARES AND PRUNING HOOKS

TEXT: ISAIAH 2: 1-4

“The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. In days to come the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, “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.” For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He 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.”

What shall we do with these words?

They are good words but they are so far from our present reality! It makes me wonder: is it disrespectful to our soldiers to even speak these words; do these words condemn our national policies; and is it foolish to even dream of a time when our young shall learn war no more?

For us to speak of peace is different than when those who have been oppressed by war and violence speak -- in the same way that I can speak about the grief one feels when a child dies but in a way that is distinct from those who have actually lost a child. Life can teach some pretty brutal lessons and I am not exactly sure just how educated about some subjects I want to be.

The Israelites were not a superpower. In fact, at the time of Isaiah, they were a chew toy being contested by the two great powers of that era, Babylon and Egypt. The Kings of Israel make and broke alliances with both sides, trying to always end up on the winning side. They were gamblers, poor gamblers, who had a knack for picking the losing side. End the end they lost everything: their Temple, their independence, and the people were carted off into exile. These are the suffering people to whom Isaiah speaks of peace.

To them war was not a method for increasing the size of their territories or filling their treasuries with foreign loot, or accumulating power. It had not worked out that way since the days of Kings David and Solomon – a long time ago. In their world war did not give; it took. It took their young men. It took their livestock. It took their taxes. It took their independence. And it almost took their relationship with God!

To them peace was as much a dream as it is to us – but they suffered much more.

Isaiah did not promise them peace. He didn't say they could sit quietly and keep the status quo and then peace would plop down in their lap as a gift!

Isaiah called the people to come back to God, the one who could establish peace and justice for all. Coming back to God was a requirement for the peace which Isaiah preached. It was sort of like the bumper sticker I saw once; "Know God – Know Peace, No God – No Peace."

Isaiah was not a prophet of peace, he was a prophet of God tasked to lead the people back from the abyss of faithlessness and to God's good graces.

Someone once told me that peace was the worm on the hook Isaiah used when fishing for believers. I'm not sure that is right but Isaiah certainly held out peace as a part of the great reward waiting for the people of Israel if they returned to faithful allegiance to God. It was a message, a hope, a future which the lost, the downtrodden, the grieving people could embrace.

We don't live in bomb ravaged cities. Every family has not lost a son or daughter to war. The fabric of our society has not torn asunder. We are not like the children of Israel...and we are thankful for that! So thankful.

Still, we long for peace. Not a shameful peace. Not a sham peace. Not a peace that leaves evil room to grow strong. Not a peace that allows victims to continue to suffer. We long for real peace.

That is certainly a Biblical concept. Isaiah is not the only one in the Bible talking about peace! Let me share with you a few of the many scriptures which deal with peace.

In Leviticus 26 "I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and no one shall make you afraid."

And in Ezekiel 34 “I will make with them a covenant of peace...I will make them and the region around my hill a blessing; and I will send down the showers in their season; they shall be showers of blessing...They shall no more be plunder for the nations...they shall live in safety, and no one shall make them afraid.”

And Jesus said, in Matthew 9, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.”

In Matthew 26, “Put your sword back for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.”

In Luke 1, “By the tender mercies of God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet in the way of peace.”

John 14 “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

The Apostle Paul, in Romans 14 said, “Let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual up-building.”

And James, the brother of Jesus wrote in James 3, “True justice is the harvest reaped by peacemakers from seeds sown in a spirit of peace.”

If you consider how often the Bible preaches peace then it becomes apparent that talking about peace only on Peace Sunday is like telling your mother that you love her only on Mother’s Day. Peace is too important to be discussed but once a year!

As a representative for God, I think that what God really wants us for us to stop focusing on what we want, what we fear, and what we think is possible – and instead to concentrate on what God can and will do when people have faith.

There are several different kinds of peace to seek.

First, there is the peace that comes when nations stop shooting at each other. An end to war!

Second, the peace that happens when people stop solving conflicts using violence. An end to murder, rape, assault and such.

Third, the peace that comes when families stop demeaning, belittling, and attacking one another. And end to emotional violence.

Fourth, there is the peace that happens when we stop allowing other people and conditions to ruin our lives. The beginning of inner peace.

And lastly, there is the peace that comes when our hearts are right with God and we fear not even death. The spiritual peace that passes all understanding.

Isaiah's talk about beating swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks is symbolic but it points to turning our energy and thoughts from something violent and harmful and to things that are peaceful and productive.

Creating peace on any of the five levels may be a huge task for us – but even the journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step so let's think about taking a step.

An unknown author once wrote:

"I cannot alleviate poverty but I can feed one hungry person.

I cannot end war but I can extend a branch of peace to my neighbor.

I cannot prevent death but I can hold the hand of a dying man.

That may not seem like much, but it is far harder than devising political schemes for social betterment, and ultimately it is everything!"

Take a step this week toward making peace!

Once I suggested to congregations that they start with the peace closest to home – first spending their available time and energy to create spiritual peace, inner peace, and peace within their families. I no longer am sure that is the way to go – for it is all too easy to spend all our time and energy there and have nothing left with which to work to bring peace to our communities and to our globe.

God needs advocates for peace both within our communities and in our nation. Can you be one of God's advocates for peace? Can the Prince of Peace count on you?