

## STUDY WAR NO MORE

Isaiah 2:1-4

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You've heard me pray the words from today's Isaiah reading many times, if you worship regularly at this church. We lift up, almost every week, prayers for places of conflict, and often we pray for the day when, as Isaiah says, the people of God will beat swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. It's not a passage we hear often in church, but it's the basis for a beloved spiritual: "I'm gonna lay down my sword and shield down by the riverside, down by the riverside, down by the riverside, I'm gonna lay down my sword and shield down by the riverside and study war no more."

As our hearts and minds bend toward the coming of the Christchild, we read passages from scripture that speak of longing for God's inbreaking, of the vast chasm between the world as it is and the world as God dreams it, of visions of creation restored to God's Kin-dom, of the call to be awake and alert to all that God is doing, to strain expectantly toward the Reign of God.

In that spirit, we hear today from the vision of the prophet Isaiah, from the second chapter. In the first chapter of Isaiah, there is a preface noting that this is the vision of Isaiah the prophet, son of Amoz, and then the whole first chapter excoriates the people, pronouncing judgment and condemnation on their sinfulness, promising destruction, proclaiming God's weariness with empty worship from people who persistently refuse to live in harmony with God's commandments. And then after a chapter of hellfire and brimstone, commentator Barbara Lundblad notes, it is as if the book starts fresh. As if Isaiah took a breath and decided to start over, reintroducing himself: "The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and

Jerusalem.” Instead of condemnation and disgust with the world as it is, Isaiah offers the people a vision of the world as it will be, a vision of hope and promise, a *vision* – a visually rich image – he didn’t *hear* a word, he says he *saw* a word. “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.”

Isaiah isn’t naïve – the whole book of his prophecies reflects that he knows the complexity and violence of the world of his day – not so unlike ours, although the nations and the technologies of warfare have changed. He knows how far this world is from laying down its weapons. Still, he sings to the people of God, offering a vision and a promise that God will surely one day lead us to a different way, a better world.

As I reflected on the passage, my mind settled on the words “neither shall they learn war any more,” and I thought about how the world we live in teaches war. Anyone who has made it through a couple of years of high school history can certainly list out the major wars that our nation has been involved with. We sit in our history classrooms and learn about the history of our nation by studying conflicts and battles and weapons and even highly specific lessons about military tactics. I don’t want to assume what you might have covered in your particular classes, but I’m remembering lectures about gas warfare in World War I, about the Battle of Gettysburg and Pickett’s Charge in the Civil War, about D-Day in World War II, and those were just some

of the highlights from an American high school education. We have many other ways of studying war, from Ken Burns documentaries and Oscar-nominated historical films about various battles and conflicts, to hobbyists making scale models, to the entire system that educates and trains the military – several of Bailes’s and my family members serve or have served in the National Guard, and I often hear about all the training and education that goes into military service. This is the world we live in, and I’m not suggesting that we should bury our heads in the sand. But I notice how much time and effort goes into helping humanity learn war – the history of wars, the weaponry of wars, the tactics of war. One day, Isaiah promises, humanity will learn war no more. That day is not today. But what if we studied peace with even a fraction of the dedication with which we learn war? What if every high school student learned about some of the great historical processes of peace-making with the same attention and detail that we bring to the Battle of Gettysburg or the Invasion of Normandy? What if we learned with great nuance about the end of Apartheid and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that helped South Africa to peacefully address the atrocities that had taken place there?

A psychological principle that I’ve learned as a parent, and seen implemented at my children’s schools, is that we help children learn to behave appropriately by describing and praising the behavior we do want to see, rather than the behavior we don’t want to see. Our human brains are more able to understand and apply the direction “please walk” than “don’t run.” We are more able to make changes if we hear “please use a quiet voice” rather than “don’t shout.” We are better able to learn a new way if someone describes what we should do, rather than what we should stop doing. And if we hear only of the behavior we should stop, we’re more likely to continue that behavior, and less able to imagine some other alternative. Our adult brains are more capable of transposing a “stop this” into a “start that,” more able to imagine alternatives and

solutions, but we, too, are more capable of transformation when we're given something to look toward, and so I wonder: what kind of world would it be if we studied peace with the same attention that we brought to studying war?

Which brings us back to Isaiah, whose book opens with condemnation and anger, but stops, resets, and turns toward a vision of a world made right. As if Isaiah, too, knows that we cannot transform the violent and warlike ways of the world as it is unless we have a vision of the world as it could be. And so he offers us such a vision. A positive vision of peace and justice: weapons of war beaten into the tools of agricultural for the nourishment of humanity. The image on the bulletin cover shows a sculpture which is located in New York City, at the United Nations, a sculpture of a man beating his sword into a plow. Neither a sword nor a plowshare is a familiar object for daily living in our context, but I heard recently of a project by artist Pedro Reyes in Culiacan, Mexico. He collected guns from residents of his area, incentivizing them to turn in their firearms by offering vouchers for appliances and electronics. He was able to collect 1527 guns, 40% of which were high-powered automatic weapons. Then, he melted the guns down and recast them into 1527 shovel heads, which were turned into shovels, each with a handle that describes the project. Then, the 1527 shovels were used to plant 1527 trees throughout the community. The project was called *Palas para Pistolas*, which means, "shovels for guns."

We cannot ignore the violent realities of this world. But Advent invites us to attend to our yearning for a world made whole, a world where we will study war no more. As one way of listening to the Spirit in this season, I would invite you to study peace – to seek out stories of people trying to do God's work, to make the world better, to heal and reconcile. Learn about the interpersonal peace of conflict resolution, or the inner peace of contemplative prayer, or about the work of an organization that seeks to make the world more peaceful. In this Advent season,

may hope be kindled in us – hope for the day when all people and nations will study war no more. The day when the Prince of Peace will reign.

Amen.