

Study War No More  
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Isaiah 2:1-4

*The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.*

<sup>2</sup>*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.*

<sup>3</sup>*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.*

<sup>4</sup>*He shall judge between the nations,  
 and shall arbitrate for many peoples;  
 they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,  
 and their spears into pruning-hooks;  
 nation shall not lift up sword against nation,  
 neither shall they learn war any more.*

Through the last four weeks Steve and I have been preaching on the themes of Advent as we have prepared to move toward Advent and the Christmas season this year. As we put together the sermon series we were intentional about the order in which we preached each sermon, as there is a progression that can be traced from one theme to the next.

On the first week Steve preached about the importance of hope as hope must be the starting point for us as people of faith. We are called to be aware of God's presence within and around us and to have hope for what that presence might bring and do.

On the second week then I preached about joy, something that can be experienced on a personal level as we begin to understand and to respond to that hope.

Last week then, Steve preached about love, a theme that is relational as we interact with one another. Starting with hope and then learning to live with Joy we are called to share love with others whom we meet.

Finally, this week I have the huge task of talking about peace. When we truly begin to love one another – each and every one another – we might finally begin to realize and to experience peace. So we've started at the core with hope, moved to the personal level with joy, branched out to our extended relationships and talked about love, and now we turn our scope to a more communal focus as we talk about and wrestle with the concept of Peace.

Two weeks ago we talked about living with joy. In many ways this is the same concept that we often hear referred to as having inner peace. Today we're going to talk about a more communal peace, a peace that we can (and are called to have) with others as well as with all of creation.

To start us off this morning lets spend a minute or two talking about what Peace is. It's one of those words for which we all likely have a general understanding, but would be hard pressed to define in concrete terms. Looking up peace in the dictionary one can find 17 different definition of what it is. It is a tough concept to boil down into a simple understanding. It is a difficult concept to truly grasp, especially in today's world.

One of the major complicating factors that makes Peace so difficult to define is the relative elusiveness of it in our world today. When we look at families and communities we see conflict and tension and division. When we look at our planet's history it seems as if war and conflict have always been around, existing in this perpetual cycle. All too often we have seen these conflicts play out in the name of faith and of God

– from the Christian Crusades to the Muslim Extremists today. When violence is executed in the name of God it makes the quest for peace even more difficult to understand.

To frame our conversation about the significance and importance of Peace I have chosen popular words from the book of Isaiah. These words are a prophecy spoken by Isaiah, about the ways in which God would be at work within the lives of the Israelites.

Isaiah 2:1-4 reads,

*The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.*

These few verses are quite popular and often used in celebrations of Memorial Day or Veterans Day to commemorate the work that God does as a peacemaker, to bring an end to conflict and turmoil. In addition to being significant in content, Biblical Scholars also say that these words are quite significant for the sequence in which they appear.

There are four significant things being named in this passage that are going to come according to Isaiah. First of all, the mountain of the Lord's house will be elevated and exalted. God and God's people will rise to power. Secondly, we are told that after this happens there will be a great pilgrimage of people to this mountain – people will be drawn to witness and to experience the greatness of God being made known. Thirdly, the reason people will travel on this pilgrimage is so that they can encounter God in order to

learn God's way. Finally, we are told that God's instructions are and will be instructions of peace and justice for all of God's creation. In essence, God will be made great, but it will not be for the power of individuals or of a select few, but God will be made great in order to bring about a reign of peace.

Gene M. Tucker, one of the contributors to the New Interpreter's Bible makes the following observation about this text. "The Hebrew word for peace does not appear in this vision of a world without war, but that is what the promise entails. Beyond the absence of military conflict, there will be justice, the resolution of conflicts on the basis of God's justice. Moreover, a major economic shift will occur. Swords and spears are relatively cheap today, but in antiquity their production diverted significant resources. The relatively simple mechanical transformation of swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks – any blacksmith could do it – represents the diversion of tools of destruction to tools that provide food."

In essence, peace as it is talked about in this Isaiah text is about two things. Peace is the absence of violence and Peace is also the presence of Justice. Even though it seems that conflict and war simply exist, we see the call from God to the people of Israel, and to us as a people of faith today, to beat swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning-hooks so that nation will no longer lift up sword against nation and so that we shall study war no more. Again, Peace is the absence of violence, but it is also the presence of Justice.<sup>1</sup>

Traditionally, the political definition of peace originated among the Romans who defined Peace, or Pax, as the absence of war. However, peace is more than simply just the absence of war between two nation states. True peace is the absence of violence of

any kind. Since World War II there has been a decrease in the number conflicts between nation states. However, violent internal conflicts have become more of a central concern. Refugees in the Darfur experience some of the most atrocious violence and suffering in our world today though Sudan is not engage in war with another state. In contexts like these, Peace would be the absence of violence among any groups whether they're a part of a sovereign nation state or not.

On the flipside of this then is the idea that true peace requires more than simply the absence of violence, it also requires the presence of justice. Gandhi, one of the most successful advocates for peaceful change suggested that if an oppressive society lacks violence, the society is still not peaceful, because of the injustice and the oppression. According to Gandhi and his vision of peace, more than simply the absence of violence is required, justice must also be present.

In the 50s and 60s when Martin Luther King, Jr. and other members of the civil rights movement led non-violent protests of the racial discrimination in our country, they understood this concept, that peace was more than simply a lack of violence. They observed that while there was not open combat between blacks and whites, there was an unjust system in place that was oppressive to African Americans. King was accused by many of "disturbing the peace" but countered by observing, "True peace is not merely the absence of tension: it is the presence of justice."

Peace is both about the absence of violence and about the presence of justice. These two concepts are related in profound ways to part of our call as United Methodists. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement had three general rules for Christian living: first, to do no harm, second, to do good, and third, to attend to the

ordinances of God. These first two rules for Christian living, to do no harm, and to do good, are directly connected to the idea that peace is about both the absence of war and the presence of justice.

We are all too aware of the reality that our world is full of intricately interconnected systems that make it quite difficult for any one person to step in and radically change the world. As individuals we can't do major massive overhauls to combat violence. By ourselves there is no way that we can bring an end to violence and war and usher in God's reign of peace. We can however do small things to protest violence and to work for peace.

When it comes to bringing violence to an end there are a number of small things that we can do that begin with what we expose ourselves, our children and our grandchildren to. Violent and gory television, video games, and movies are increasingly commonplace and desensitize us to the realities of violence. While it might be unpopular, we can take a stand to regulate and restrict what we expose young children to, we can make decisions about what we watch ourselves.

There is a great commercial that I've seen in the last couple of months, I think it's for some kind of cable television monitoring system. In the commercial a mom is sipping a cup of coffee and chatting with this big scary killer looking guy who has a chainsaw and she says something to the effect of, "well you're just the scariest undead thing on tv, I really mean it. But you see, we need to talk about that. I'm afraid you might give my kids nightmares so I'm going to have to block you."

There are choices we can make and simple tools available to help us limit the things to which we expose our children. And by being aware of the things we all watch

and the games we play, we can begin to address the realities of violence. Even if we can't change the systems that exist, we can alter the ways in which they impact our own families. If nothing else, make sure that you're having honest conversations with your kids and grandkids about the realities of violence and war in the world today.

At the same time, there are a great number of opportunities for us to be involved in work for Justice in the world. During this holiday season alone many people feel a tug on their hearts to get involved in some of kind of work for good. Here at Ridge you have had the opportunity to bring in food for pack-a-sack, our food drive for Thanksgiving. In the coming weeks you have the opportunity to ring the bell for the Salvation Army so that people might have assistance with utility bills and food. And you'll also have the opportunity to be involved with the Salvation Army Angel Tree, helping provide Christmas gifts for Children in Lake County who are in need.

Of course there are also an endless number of organizations and opportunities outside of Ridge Church for you to be involved with work for justice too. Take some time to read more online or in the paper about the things that are happening in the world and the ways in which you can get involved in being a part of making a positive difference. As we move toward Advent we prepare to welcome to Prince of Peace into our midst. What would this look like if we were to take it seriously? Think about the possibilities!!!

In her book, *Searching for Shalom*, Ann Weems writes the following:

*"Shalom is much more than my own personal prosperity...It's much more than a sense of well-being. It's much more than quiet and calmness, much more than the absence of stress. It's much more than the 'peace' you and I wish each other, much more than no war, no conflict, no violence, no arguing, no loud voices and no red faces. It certainly is a peace that passes my own understanding. Shalom is something that won't come from wishing on a star or keeping the rules. It's nothing I can buy with wealth or power or*

*prestige. It's a gift, a gift that was promised. It's something I keep searching for and hoping for, but something I know I can't have if you don't have it, you and all the yours out there in the world."*

The idea of Peace is best understand as Shalom – as something that all persons, all of God’s creation gets to experience. We might not be able to beat swords into plowshares, but we all have the opportunity to find small ways to make a difference, to work for peace. May you come to understand the hope that we have in God. May you come to experience true joy as a result of that hope. May you experience and share the love of God and of others. And may you work for peace.

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<sup>i</sup> Illustrations for these two understandings of Peace come from Wikipedia’s entry for “Peace.”