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“When Yesterday’s Hope Outshines Tomorrow’s Desires”

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Romans 13:11-14; Isaiah 2:1-5

Our passage this morning from Isaiah 2 is one of the greatest articulations of hope ever expressed in human language. “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 2:4).

These words are also found in the prophet Micah, a contemporary of Isaiah. They were penned at a time of deep uncertainty for the Jewish people. The northern kingdom of Israel had been destroyed by foreign invasion, and the southern kingdom of Judah was hanging on by a thread, living in the shadow of their potential destruction.

The vision of hope speaks of a time when nations shall move toward Israel in peace, not against it in threatening provocations. In this vision of the future, nations come to hear the word of God that the Jews have heard in their Torah—instructions for life and well-being, for direction and guidance, for discernment and just decisions, for wholeness and peace. The vision was in stark contrast to the situation in which Judah found itself. As it turns out, the vision stands over against the wide course of human experience and history.

These words were uttered in a specific historical moment and situation far from us in time. Nevertheless the potency of its vision has captured generations of people, from diverse backgrounds and religions, as a hope to live in, to strive for, to work toward in this world marred by warfare and strife and injustice. To walk in ways of justice and peace; to transform weapons of destruction into implements of growth and harvest; to invest, not in strategies of self-protection or conquest, but in life-giving openness and cooperation.

Much like the words of people such as Martin Luther King, Jr., words have addressed specific contexts and moments in time, yet resonate far beyond the boundaries of their original context and take on a life of their own. “I have a dream.” Those words have found their way to the lips of many who know the experience of discrimination but were not even born when those words were delivered at the Lincoln Memorial.

Emblazoned on a wall opposite the United Nations headquarters in New York City are the words, “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.” At the center of an international and multi-cultural institution, these words stand.

It is a vision that stirs the imagination and awakens in the human heart the yearning to implement such a strategy, if only we could.

Such a vision stands in stark contrast to our present situation just as it did when Isaiah and Micah recorded it. Perhaps that is why such a hope has endured through history and continues to articulate the quest of diverse cultures and races and nations.

And we return to this vision, especially in the season of Advent. It speaks to the Christian community of the continuing hope of what Jesus Christ initiated in his incarnation, his life and ministry, his death and resurrection, and his promised kingdom. The Christian community claims such a future is possible and is secretly present, if only in unseen ways or occasional glimpses. Yet it is that to which we strive.

Is such a vision merely a pipe dream?

Most of us probably don't think in terms of having "enemies." Such a term we might use to refer to those opposed to our country and its interests, to our policies, to those engaged against us in military conflict. It's a world where enemies will use any tactic in order to win, where no distinction exists between innocent bystander and combatant.

Yet occasionally we treat leaders in our own country as enemies if we disagree with them. The workplace can become a battleground of contention where responsibility and trust and equity fall to the onslaught of power and ego and money. Family relationships, torn by feuds, disappointments large and small, singular slights or repetitions of hurt—even family relationships can take on the character of enemies. And sometimes we may even refer to ourselves as our worst enemy.

For those of us among the civilian population, we don't think of us as learning the techniques of warfare. Yet don't we all employ and refine strategies to defend and preserve ourselves and our interests? And sometimes the best defense is a good offense. Strike first before they have a chance.

I would dare say we have made little progress in the past 2,500 years realizing this vision personally, religiously, socially, internationally. Maybe it is an unrealistic vision.

Nevertheless it remains compelling, if for no other reason than humanity needs it so desperately.

Perhaps we can find some wisdom in these words to direct us on our quest.

One of the striking images of this vision is that no conquest or subjugation plays a role in it. People voluntarily come. Nations are not compelled by anything other than a desire for peace and equity, and they come because they have seen it played

out in real life. They need not fear that insiders will compromise their own interests or their own perspectives will be disregarded as inconsequential.

God, the impartial one who is fair to a fault and at the same time balances mercy and love, is seen as the mediating judge and arbiter. There is no room for “influence peddlers” or “spin masters” here.

The possibility of allowing persons to be who they are and to become what they choose is so foreign to my experience. I remember as a youth and young adult, my primary goal was to be like someone else: someone more knowledgeable, funny, substantive. And my task was to turn myself into that person. And I had so much help from the church and the culture to be someone other than who I was.

An old master came to the end of his life, and he told his disciples that he would soon depart. They were sorrowful and said, “What will we do? You have been a veritable Moses to us!” And the master was deeply saddened. He said, “Only Moses can be Moses. I had hoped to be myself in this life.”

It is e.e. cummings who wrote, “To be nobody but yourself in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting.”

I believe the Christian church needs to learn this lesson. Too often, our strategies for mission and growth are compromised with self-serving agendas. A recent article in the *Atlantic Monthly* was written by a researcher into the growth of militant atheism in the last decade. (June 6, 2013 by Larry Alex Taunton).

The article concludes that the greatest contributor to this rise in atheism is the conduct of the church itself. Most of these young atheists made their decision in reaction to Christianity, and not in response to the new atheism as articulated by Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins. They were familiar with the church and had participated in its life and leadership.

The research was eye opening. What they found in these atheists’ experience was this:

- There was a lack of connection between the church’s message of how to live life and the life of Jesus Christ and the Bible.
- Churches offered superficial answers to life’s difficult questions.
- Few ministers take the Bible seriously.
- The church in its internal political life favors appeal over substance.
- The article concludes with this statement: “These students were, above all else, idealists who longed for authenticity, and having failed to find it in their churches, they settled for a non-belief that, while less grand in its promises, felt more genuine and attainable.” As one person stated: “Christianity is something that if you really believed it, it would change your life and you would want to change [the lives] of others. I haven’t seen too much of that.”

It is a question worth struggling with: how do we winsomely invite those outside the church to engage the hope we have found without requiring them to become just like us? Is it okay to be different?

The hope of Isaiah 2 is that peoples and nations will come because they know justice and mercy will be enacted for all, and not merely for some. It is not a vision where there are no conflicts. When community gathers, conflicts increase. No, it is not the lack of conflict that is portrayed; it is the way conflict is resolved. The arbiter will be the one who created the wondrous diversity of humanity and holds no one particular group as special or favored above another. It is in that confidence that people can come together.

A wonderful story is told about the former mayor of New York City, Fiorello LaGuardia, during the depths of the depression. LaGuardia was quite a character: as mayor, he would ride the city fire trucks, take entire orphanages to baseball games, and when the city newspapers went on strike, he would get on the radio and read the Sunday comic strips to the children.

On one particularly bitter cold winter’s night in 1935, Mayor LaGuardia turned up in a night court that served the poorest ward in the city. He dismissed the judge for the evening and took over the bench himself to hear the cases.

Eventually a tattered old woman was brought before him accused of stealing a loaf of bread. She told the court that her daughter's husband had deserted her, the daughter was sick, and her grandchildren were starving. The shopkeeper from whom the bread was stolen insisted on pressing charges. "My store is in a very bad neighborhood. She's got to be punished or others will do the same."

The mayor sighed. He turned to the old woman and said, "I've got to punish you. The law makes no exception—ten dollars or ten days in jail." And as he spoke, LaGuardia reached into his own pocket, and pulled out a ten dollar bill.

"Here is the woman's fine," he said, "and furthermore, I'm fining everyone in this court room fifty cents for living in a city where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant."

The next day, the New York Times ran a story that \$47.50 was turned over to the bewildered old woman. It was given by all in the courtroom: the red-faced store owner, some seventy petty criminals, people with traffic violations, city policemen, the bailiff and the judge. And as the woman was handed the money, the entire courtroom gave LaGuardia a standing ovation.

The reality depicted in Isaiah 2 demonstrates openness and acceptance and mercy rather than compliance and subjugation and vengeance. Can that become a vision for the church to consider in this Season of Advent, this season of hope?

Yet Isaiah's prophetic vision does not merely serve as an encouragement to hope. This passage includes instruction to those of the house of faith. "Come, let *us* walk in the light of the Lord." God's people are instructed to take the first steps on the path that all the nations will one day tread.

So for us, it poses the question, "In whom does our trust rest?" Is it in our own schemes and efforts? Is it in the acquisitions that populate our immediate desires in this season of getting? Or is it in the God made known in scripture and the vision gifted to God's people?

I am grateful that women and men of faith have been so guided by this hope for the future and have been so steadied by their trust of God in the moment that they could begin this path in their own lifetimes. They have been peacemakers, reconcilers, healers, hoppers, showing in their own lives what will ultimately happen in the kingdom of God. They have lived the vision or they are living the vision for us to see. I pray that in the season of Advent, God will help us move further down this path which Isaiah's vision provides, exchanging fear for love, anxiety for trust, hatred for peace, compliance for acceptance.

What will it take for us to dismantle war colleges so that we can create institutions of peace and people can learn how to wage love?

Isaiah provides a hope and some practical, if general, understandings to that end. And the message is consistent with the hope found in the coming of Jesus Christ, his life, his message, his purpose, his call.

In this season of Advent, when we are dreaming really big, it is important for us to hear again the hope for peace.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.