

## Hope! First Sunday of Advent Isaiah 2: 1-8

***1 This is what Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. 2 It shall happen in the latter days, that the mountain of Yahweh's house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; and all nations shall flow to it. 3 Many peoples shall go and say, "Come, let's go up to the mountain of Yahweh, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths." For out of Zion the law shall go out, and Yahweh's word from Jerusalem. 4 He will judge between the nations, and will decide concerning many peoples; and 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. 5 House of Jacob, come, and let us walk in the light of Yahweh.***

Today, Israel lives a troubled existence. There are many who seek her doom—and the reality is that this is nothing new. In all of her history she has been a tiny nation wedged between those who would do her harm. Early on they were huge empires who were constantly vying for superiority. Israel has been in existence between 3000 and 2500 years and there have been few times when she did not live under one threat or another. Wars have been a constant in her history.

One reason Israel kept failing and falling and being punished by God seems to be her failure to follow the command God gave to the Israelites—to destroy or drive out the nations—Seems harsh. but neglecting it seems to be one reason Israel failed over and over again. In fact, following today's passage, we see accusations that fit that pattern—of being changed by evil instead of changing it by being righteous.

***For you have forsaken your people, the house of Jacob, because they are filled from the east, with those who practice divination like the Philistines, and they clasp hands with the children of foreigners. 7 Their land is full of silver and gold, neither is there any end of their treasures. Their land also is full of horses, neither is there any end***

*of their chariots. 8 Their land also is full of idols. They worship the work of their own hands, that which their own fingers have made.*

In this passage, “clasping hands” is probably speaking of marriage.” Gold and silver and horses and chariots, were all necessary parts of trade and security—but Israel seems to be trusting in her riches and her strength—as represented by horses and chariots for her army—instead of God. Looking back, we can see that was a mistake.

Maybe some day later we can chase down how God’s mercy and love could be in play when he commanded his people to drive out and destroy the nations, but God seems to have still cared about the nations—in fact, the ultimate fulfillment of the promise of Abraham was that he would bring salvation to them.

However, since the time of Noah, they had—once again—become wicked. And in Exodus 9:5, God said, “Do not think I’m giving you this land because you are better than the inhabitants. It is for the wickedness of these nations that I drive them out.”

Since the inhabitants refused to turn from their wickedness, putting Israel in their midst would only corrupt their ability to follow God. We see this throughout Israel’s history. Each time they were judged by God, it was when they followed the ways of the nations around them and became partakers of their sins. Without the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, their only restraint was from God’s commands and by separation from the other nations.

In Isaiah’s time—when these passages were written—Israel was under the control of Assyria and during Isaiah’s lifetime Assyria swept in and utterly destroyed the Northern Kingdom (Israel) and threatened to do the same thing to the Southern Kingdom (Judah). Judah’s leaders were relatively weak and they decided to appease the Assyrians and in effect, they were also destroyed—or absorbed.

**And yet, there were those like Isaiah who—with God’s leadership—envisioned a different reality. Hoped for what might be. Hoped for more. Hoped for a way of salvation for his nation and his people. The prophets hoped for a time when Israel would be faithful and allow God to be God. Israel was weary of war and threat and even weary of the divisions that had torn their nation in two under Soloman. They were weary of instability. They were weary of a world where power and its potential oppression were the controlling factors of their world.**

**The prophets understood that God’s vision of the world was much different. They knew that the God they served was the God who heard their cries in Egypt and entered into history to end their slavery and set them free. They knew that because God was such a God that he would not stand for his people to be oppressed forever. And so they hoped. And they dreamed. And they listened to the dream of God—and they wrote that dream in the Scriptures—Israel’s Scriptures but ours also.**

**They dreamed of a time when God would again enter into history and bring an end to suffering. They dreamed that he would establish his reign on earth and re-establish all creation—making it what he intended it to be in the beginning. They dreamed of a time when the division that had torn them apart—north and south—would be healed and they would be one nation again. They dreamed of a time when war would end—a time when one nation would not *lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more*. Israel, in all her hopes and dreams has not yet reached that time—and neither have we.**

**If we didn’t know it before, we learned it on 9/11/2001. We were reminded of why the prophets hoped and dreamed that the days of hate and war would be over. Even so, we are a young nation that hasn’t seen as much war as many others—especially those in the East. They have REALLY experienced the division and the hate the sword can bring. They know the pain and the suffering. Many in the East today dream of the peace Isaiah wrote about—many hope some day they will no longer see war.**

**With all they have seen, many desire, just as the prophets did, a peace so lasting that ways of war are no longer even studied—*neither shall they learn war anymore...***

**For many of us—especially in the religious culture I grew up in—such a time was for the future, somewhere out there in time when the “New Jerusalem” would fix everything. There is no question that such a “reign of God” was certainly part of Isaiah’s dream. Certainly, when the angels appeared to the shepherds and sang about “peace on earth” they were speaking of the power and the reign of the Christ—we can hang our hopes and our dreams on that which is to come**

**Still, when you and I see the horror of terrorism and killing and hate, we can see that God would have us work for peace in the here and now also.**

**It may feel that you and I have little or no control over what goes on in the world today—BUT—let me suggest two things.**

**One—we should always be thinking and hoping—doing what we can do worldwide to foster peace. Praying consistently and constantly but also putting our faith in our God and our prayers—and as the men and women of God did many years ago—as we just studied from the book of Hebrews—put feet on our faith. What does that look like? I don’t know what it looks like for you this season.**

**For Vonna and me, it looks like giving animals and food and water through a mission-project instead of just giving “stuff” to our children. For Christmas. For all of us it means praying specifically and genuinely, even those we disagree with—even those who hate us and would do us harm.**

**Two—we can work for peace on the personal level—where we CAN make a difference. If we are to pray for and hope for genuine peace in the lives of others around the world—we cannot keep swinging our own personal swords and spears in our families, our church, and our community.**

**We certainly need to follow the example of the prophets and dream big dreams and pray big prayers and hope big hopes—for our world, both now and in the future. We should be expecting God to transform our world and ultimately transport us to a new world to come. THAT is God's responsibility.**

**BUT we can begin that journey to peace in our own arena. We can transform OUR swords into plowshares. We then can use those plowshares to plow under those long-term fights with our families—be they our literal brothers and sisters or those spiritual brothers and sisters here in church with us today.**

**You and I can't bring peace to Israel today, but we can make amends and bring peace to our own lives—beginning right now.**

**Isaiah knew that ultimately you and I would not be able to bring peace to our world. He knew that even as we do our best, the world will continue to resist and not yield to our efforts. Still, he believed it would come. He hoped in a future that was God's future—where all would be as intended.**

**Advent. The coming. Peace on earth has already come—nearly 2000 years ago. And yet it still has not fully come. In the sending of the Christ child we see a glimpse of what can be—what WILL be. We see a promise fulfilled—and yet that promise is now new promises and new expectations.**

**So we dream Isaiah's dream again. We dream the dream of a divided people—hoping among hope for wholeness—even as we begin hammering our own swords and as we hope and pray for plowshares.**

**When? How long? How? When will the day come? We do not know. But we hope and we wait—but we wait expectantly. For all we are worth, we live the reality he has promised and that he has already shown us.**

**As we cry out for his coming, we know that he has to come—he will come. When he comes, may he find us hard at work—hoping for and working for peace. Hammering on our swords and then plowing under our fights and our hurts and our words. Pruning our hearts and lives with the hooks made from our spears.**

**A wise old Rabbi instructed his students by asking questions. "How can a person tell when the darkness ends and the day begins?" One student said, "when there is enough light to see an animal in the distance and tell if it is a sheep or a goat." Another said, "when there is enough light to tell if a tree is an oak or a fig."**

**The Rabbi gently said, "No—it is when you can look into a man's face and recognize him as your brother. For if you cannot recognize in another's face the face of your brother, the darkness has not yet begun to lift and the light has not yet come."**

**Today, on this first Sunday of Advent—we celebrate hope through Jesus Christ. I hope that his light has begun to show us there are brothers and sisters still to be recognized.**