

sermon-12/2/07 Newport Presbyterian Church
“Waiting for Peace”
Isaiah 2:1-5

Sandy and I like to get away over the Thanksgiving weekend. We had a wonderful time on our trip to Port Hadlock this year. While there we watched a movie: *Joyeaux Noel*. It is a story based on real events during WWI. Apparently during the war, there were several occasions when the enemy combatants declared a cease fire on Christmas Eve to celebrate together. In our movie, the cease fire was between the Germans, Scots, and the French, all dug into their trenches across a field from one another.

On Christmas Eve both sides started singing and eventually the commanders of the three forces decided on a cease fire for Christmas Eve. Soldiers from each country came out of their trenches and came together for a shared Christmas Eve mass said in Latin. Then they shared drinks and showed each other pictures of their families. The next day the cease fire continued with a soccer game after which they helped each other bury their dead that were strewn about the field in frozen lumps.

The cease fire had to end, of course, and the war continued. It seemed absolutely absurd. How can you kill someone when you have come to know they are just like you with families they miss? How can you kill someone after you have shared food and drink, and worshipped together celebrating Christmas with them? Isn't there a better way to arbitrate disputes between countries than going to war?

It is questions like those that come to mind every Advent when we wait for, long for with aching hearts, the coming of the Prince of Peace. Such waiting and longing for peace reminds us we are, at heart, an Advent people. We are a people that wait year in and year out for a day when we can beat our swords into plowshares. We wait for a day when wars will cease, when parents won't have to bury their children, when fear and hatred no longer rule the day.

Especially this year we understand this longing. We long for an end to the unfortunate war in Iraq. We wait with anxious hearts for peace between Israel and the Palestinians to finally be achieved after the baby steps they have taken at Annapolis this week. We feel the ache of this longing.

But our hopes for peace, inspired by the prophet Isaiah's words in chapter two, are nothing new. Perhaps you know the text from Isaiah 2:4 is carved into the walls of the United Nations building in New York. All nations have not streamed to Jerusalem, as Isaiah prophesied. But many nations have streamed to that building in New York to be instructed by the words from the Hebrew Bible.

Interestingly, Isaiah was not the only author of those famous words we read today. If you turn to the book of Micah, you can read almost the exact same words in 4:1-4 that are in Isaiah 2:1-5. One of the differences is that Micah adds a mention about fear. He writes, “Neither shall they learn war any more; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid. . .”

The mention of fear is an important addition to what Isaiah wrote. When we are afraid, we make terrible decisions. If our leaders can make us afraid, they can manipulate us to condone things we might regret later. Freedom from fear is central to the Christmas story. We hear it when the angels tell the shepherds, "Do not be afraid." Each Advent we anticipate hearing those words again on Christmas Eve. Those words, and the hope they speak to, are part of the reward we get for all our waiting.

The trouble is, when will Isaiah's words ever come to pass? The hopes he raises seem so grandiose. He says the nations won't even learn war any more. That sounds about as realistic as the U.S. telling the Iranians they should not even learn how to make nuclear weapons, let alone own one. How can you stop people from learning the wrong things?

We can't help asking if Isaiah's vision will ever have a chance in a world where evil seems to run amok. How can you defeat evil if you don't have any swords? Aren't pacifists unrealistic and naïve?

It reminds me of Jay Leno making fun of the inane things Miss America candidates say when they are interviewed in the midst of the contest. He jokingly has one contestant say, "As Miss America, my goal is to bring peace to the entire world, and then to get my own apartment."

Are Isaiah's words that naïve and out of touch? I want to answer that with a resounding, "No!" Isaiah's vision is absolutely critical for people who want to be faithful to God. It is incredibly important we read these words on the first Sunday of Advent, on the first Sunday of this new liturgical year.

The secular world celebrates January first as its New Year's Day. The secular world begins the new year, then, with a party, and often a little tipsy or hung over! The Church enters its new year waiting, longing, hoping for a world that will live as if God reigns. The only way we can get to that world is to have a vision. We need to know what we are heading towards so we can take the steps today that will make that vision a reality tomorrow.

The steps toward a world where swords are beaten into plowshares are not easy ones. One commentator said it is important to note Isaiah says we need to **beat** our swords to make them into instruments of peace. It doesn't happen automatically. It is hard work. I would also suggest it is risking our lives for peace. We ask that of our soldiers in war. We expect them to put their lives on the line in the military. We will have to make some of the same sacrifices for peace today if our world is ever going to reflect Isaiah's vision in some distant future.

Each time we take communion we remember the one who took chances, who risked his own life in his non-violent work for the ultimate freedom we call salvation. To be a disciple of the Prince of Peace comes with a cost. Let us commit ourselves to Isaiah's vision once again this Advent. Happy New Year. Amen