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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
12/1/2013, The First Sunday of Advent  
Isaiah 2:1-5

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

My text for this morning's sermon comes from our First Lesson, from Isaiah 2:4. It is a verse that speaks of peace:

...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.  
(Isaiah 2:4, RSV)<sup>1</sup>

It pleases me very much to think that when this good thing happens, when the swords are beat into plowshares, that maybe my nephew Nathan can lend a hand to the work. Nathan is a blacksmith. It is part of his work as a farrier — that is, a tradesman who shoes horses. Nathan has his smithy shop, with his forge and anvil and supply of iron, set up in a trailer attached to his truck, and he travels from horse farm to horse farm there on the Eastern Shore of Maryland shoeing the horses. Nathan is handy. He can do just about anything with iron and fire and hammer. So I bet he could do this good thing: he could beat the swords into plowshares. One more plough in the world, one less sword. He could keep at the work until all the instruments of war are converted into instruments of farming.

Now, I am not a pacifist. I believe that there *can* be just wars and I believe in defending the innocent. Whether or not any particular war *is* a just war is a matter of discernment and judgment according to the doctrine of just war. World War II, for example, was a just war, in my opinion. In any case, I believe that there can be just wars and I believe in defending the innocent. When I was young and in the military, I was one of those people who could conceive of risking and losing your life if need be for the sake of your land and your people. I have never lost that idea that there are some things so important that they are worth giving your life for. So, I might be an old fool, but I cannot bring myself to say that I do not believe in war and instruments of war.

On the other hand, it would take a madman to oppose Isaiah's prophecy of peace. Who can but long for the fulfillment of that good prophecy, when...

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<sup>1</sup> This prophecy also appears in Isaiah's contemporary Micah — Micah 4:3.

...nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

I long for that deeply, as many soldiers do, as many parents do, as everyone ought to.

## JUDAH IN THOSE DAYS

The science and the instruments of war were important in Judah back in the days of our prophet, Isaiah of Jerusalem. Those were long-ago days, about 750 years before the birth of Jesus. So, we are talking about an ancient prophecy of peace.

But it was a prophecy of peace set in the midst of war, of the rising and falling of kingdoms, and of the increasing terror represented by the growing might of the Assyrian Empire.

Isaiah gives us the year of the start of his ministry. Isaiah received his divine call to prophecy...

In the year that King Uzziah died... (Isaiah 6:1, KJV)

That was the year 742 BC.

This king, Uzziah, was a great king in certain ways. He ruled Judah for forty-one years (783-742 BC), and during his long reign Judah reached the peak of its international and economic power. Judah prospered during the time of Uzziah. A generation was permitted to grow up never experiencing a time of national humiliation or fear of a great enemy.

Those instruments of war that Isaiah promises will one day be turned into instruments of peace, well, those war instruments were a big deal for King Uzziah. In Second Chronicles, for example, we read this line about King Uzziah and his military fortifications:

<sup>14</sup>And Uzziah prepared for all the army shields, spears, helmets, coats of mail, bows, and stones for slinging. <sup>15</sup>In Jerusalem he made engines, invented by skilful men, to be on the towers and the corners, to shoot arrows and great stones. And his fame spread far, for he was marvelously helped, till he was strong. (2 Chronicles 26:14-15, RSV)

The citizens of Judah probably said, “Well done! We have ourselves a good king.”

## **MATERIALLY STRONG, BUT SPIRITUALLY WEAK**

The problem was that though Judah was materially strong, she had become spiritually weak. It is part of the strange ways of a prophet that the society by and large can be happy, but the prophet is very unhappy. The land as a whole might be flourishing — powerful in influence and economy — yet the prophet is in anguish over out-of-the-way cases of injustice and cruelty. The king is honored, the palace is luxurious, the temple is well attended, and the liturgies are beautiful, but the prophet is troubled because the widow in the gate cannot get her case heard by the judge, the hard-earned money of the poor man is being stolen through false weights and measures, and curious people are trying their hands at worshiping unknown gods. And so Isaiah is alarmed for his land. His eyes slide right on over questions of international politics and the rise and fall of empires, and he focuses on the matters of piety that matter to the Lord.

For example, the Lord hates the hypocrisy of liturgy combined with cruelty. He does not like people to come to church on the Sabbath and then go out and oppress the poor the rest of the week:

<sup>15</sup>When you spread forth your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. <sup>16</sup>Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, <sup>17</sup>learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow. (Isaiah 1:15-17, RSV)

The land is filled with idols and people are worshiping dumb things:

Their land is filled with idols; they bow down to the work of their hands, to what their own fingers have made. (Isaiah 2:8, RSV)

People in positions of authority are scoundrels and neglectful:

<sup>23</sup>Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Every one loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the fatherless, and the widow's cause does not come to them. (Isaiah 1:23, RSV)

The poor are being ground down:

<sup>14</sup>The LORD enters into judgment with the elders and princes of his people: “It is you who have devoured the vineyard, the spoil of the poor is in your houses. <sup>15</sup>What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor?” says the Lord GOD of hosts. (Isaiah 3:14-15, RSV)

Fools and knaves and delinquents are coddled, but the Lord will not abide this forever:

<sup>5</sup>The fool will no more be called noble, nor the knave said to be honorable. (Isaiah 32:5, RSV)

Like all the prophets, Isaiah’s language is extravagant. He makes much ado over small cases.<sup>2</sup> What he is doing is expressing the Lord’s dismay at cases which no one else might notice, but which deeply trouble the Lord.

## **ISAIAH IS NOT NAIVE**

Now, Isaiah is not naïve about large matters of international politics. He knows that danger is afoot in the march of the Assyrian Empire. Isaiah lives in Jerusalem and is a prophet of the Southern Kingdom. But he can look at the Northern Kingdom and see how unrepentant that kingdom is, in spite of the fiery preaching of his contemporaries Amos and Hosea, and he can easily see that the Lord is going to use Assyria to overwhelm that unrepentant land. Isaiah describes the relentless march of Assyria toward Israel, the Northern Kingdom:

<sup>26</sup>He [The LORD] will raise a signal for a nation afar off,  
and whistle for it from the ends of the earth;  
and lo, swiftly, speedily it comes!

<sup>27</sup>None is weary, none stumbles,  
none slumbers or sleeps,  
not a waistcloth is loose,  
not a sandal-thong broken;  
<sup>28</sup>their arrows are sharp,  
all their bows bent,  
their horses’ hoofs seem like flint,  
and their wheels like the whirlwind.

<sup>29</sup>Their roaring is like a lion,  
like young lions they roar;

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<sup>2</sup> This is a great theme of Abraham Joshua Heschel in his book *The Prophets*.

they growl and seize their prey,  
they carry it off, and none can rescue. (Isaiah 5:26-29, RSV)

## **A MODERN COMPARISON**

To put all of this in perspective, let's compare it to our modern world. To some degree it would be like Isaiah preaching to our land. Like Judah of old, we are a generation that has known prosperity and international influence. But suppose this changed. Suppose another empire were stirring, with the potential to overwhelm even the United States. For example, I am alarmed by China's recent claiming of a security zone over the South China Sea. South Korea, Japan, and the United States have all sent flights through the airspace in defiance of this new security zone. But China has not backed down. In fact, China has sent warplanes into the zone after the other countries defied the zone.<sup>3</sup> This challenge and defiance of superpowers could spin out of control. Of course it could!

Now the peculiar thing about Isaiah is that he knows about the superpowers and the security zones and the nuclear weapons. But what really alarms him is what you and I might be up to this coming week. What troubles Isaiah is precisely the kinds of things that remain within our control: our own lives of piety, integrity, and compassion on others. We might not be able to control international politics, but we can control ourselves. And Isaiah is convinced that if we do not control ourselves, nothing else will save us in the end. For the Lord demands righteousness in the land.

## **THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT**

A striking thing about this morning's text is the last verse, where Isaiah suddenly becomes very personal. He has been talking about big items of war and peace and the instruments of war, and suddenly he changes the grammatical person to first and second-person discourse. He puts off talking about the nations and instead talks of himself and of his people:

<sup>5</sup>O house of Jacob, come, let *us* walk in the light of the  
LORD. (Isaiah 2:5, RSV)

The same sort of thing happens in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus knows that the Israel of his day is overwhelmed by a large empire — the Roman Empire. He knows that there are nationalist movements and fervent hopes and prayers for deliverance from the hand of the oppressor. But it is as if his eyes

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<sup>3</sup> <http://news.yahoo.com/china-sends-warplanes-air-defense-zone-180012990.html>

slide right on by all that and instead bore into his disciples and through them into you and me.

Jesus knew the preaching of Isaiah about beating the swords into plowshares. Of course he did! He knew his Bible. And Isaiah had written in his Spirit in the first place. So Jesus knew Isaiah's prophecy of peace and about nations no longer studying the ways of war. But in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus focus on you and me, as if to say, let peace begin with you and me:

You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth."

<sup>39</sup>But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also;

<sup>40</sup>and if any one would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well;

<sup>41</sup>and if any one forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.

<sup>42</sup>Give to him who begs from you, and do not refuse him who would borrow from you.

<sup>43</sup>You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy."

<sup>44</sup>But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

<sup>45</sup>so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. (Matthew 5:38-45, RSV)

The world might think these are private matters of morality. Isaiah would say that they are more along the lines of saving the nation.

Of course, none of this would make any sense if Jesus is not risen from the dead. If Jesus be not risen, then our world has no one to look to for the forging of swords into plowshares — no one to trust to bring the great world of peace from out of our little deeds of peace. But he *is* risen, so let's get to it. Let's serve him, our nation, and our world through our own individual pursuit of peace, in the name of the very Prince of Peace, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.