

Visions of Peace: Study War No More

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,
on Sunday, November 27, 2022.

Psalm 122
Isaiah 2:1-5

Today is the first Sunday in Advent and the beginning of the Church's liturgical year. It is the season when we Christians make a fresh start, preparing once again for the coming of Jesus Christ, watching and waiting for the arrival of the one we call the Prince of Peace. The Advent season is a time for us to celebrate the reality that peace is one of God's great hopes for humankind.

And so among the lectionary readings for this Sunday are the two passages that were just read to us this morning. Psalm 122 calls on us to "pray for the peace of Jerusalem." And from Isaiah we heard one of the best-known passages in the entire Bible: "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."

Standing at the United Nations in New York City, looking to the west across First Avenue, you'll see those very words writ large, inscribed on what has become known as the Isaiah Wall in Ralph Bunche Park. And on the grounds of the United Nations, you'll see a powerful sculpture called "Let Us Beat Swords into Plowshares," which was a gift from the then Soviet Union presented in 1959. The bronze statue represents the figure of a man holding a hammer in one hand and, in the other, a sword which he is making into a plowshare, symbolizing humanity's desire to put an end to war and convert the means of destruction into creative tools for the benefit of all humankind. You'll also find Isaiah's words in an old, African-American spiritual: "Gonna lay down my sword and shield, down by the riverside, and study war no more."

Isaiah's words date back to the eighth century before Christ, and yet, they continue to capture our imagination today. More than twenty-seven centuries have passed, and still, we find ourselves drawn to this marvelous vision of the world at peace.

Isaiah looks forward to a day when all nations would stream to “the mountain of God, to the house of the God of Jacob, Rachel, and Leah.” That is, nations would one day come to the city of Jerusalem, to Mount Zion, to the Temple, which was believed to be God’s dwelling place on earth. They would seek to be taught God’s ways, to be subject to God’s laws, and to walk in God’s paths. Nations would trust in God to settle their international disputes instead of taking matters into their own hands. They would acknowledge God as the ultimate judge between nations and the final arbiter of international conflict. As a consequence, war would no longer be needed as a mode of national policy, and nations would begin to disarm themselves. But weapons of war would not simply be dismantled, they would be transformed into agricultural tools for sustaining life. Swords would be beaten into plowshares to till the ground for planting. And spears would be turned into pruning hooks for use in vineyards and orchards. What’s more, no more human resources would have to be devoted to planning and training for war: “nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.”

Like nations in Isaiah’s day, nations today put a great deal of resources into arming and training their military forces – the United States more than any other. They do so under the assumption that if you want peace, you have to be prepared for war. But given the incidence of wars over time, this may not be a valid assumption. Nations which invest a lot of resources in preparations for war may be more tempted to use their military forces than to refrain from doing so.

Some of you may remember the old newspaper comic strip Beetle Bailey drawn by Cartoonist Mort Walker. In one of his strips, Beetle Bailey is on the firing range shooting his rifle as his sergeant watches. Then Beetle turns philosophical . . . “Sarge, why do we have to do all this war training?” The Sarge replies, “Because in over 3,000 years of history there were less than 300 years of peace.” Beetle asks another question, “Wouldn’t it be more important then to train for more years of peace?”

Indeed, what if we studied and trained for peace instead of war?

When I was in college a new book came out entitled *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*, by Philip Hallie, which had a major impact on my life. It told the story of the French village of Le Chambon, which sheltered 5,000

Jews fleeing from the Nazis during World War II. The driving force behind the rescue effort was André Trocmé, the Protestant pastor of the village. Deeply committed to Christian nonviolence, on Sunday mornings he would preach the Sermon on the Mount, love of God and love of neighbor, reverence for life, and the necessity of resisting evil with good. The people of Le Chambon hid Jews in their homes and farmhouses and arranged for them to reach the safe haven of neutral Switzerland. In doing so, they risked their lives. Occasionally, the Gestapo raided the town. Leaders were arrested and imprisoned, and some were later killed. But despite the repression, the resistance in Le Chambon continued to the end of the war.

In the last months of German occupation, the Tartar Legion commanded by SS Colonel Metzger was poised to destroy the village and its inhabitants. But a second German officer, Major Schmeuling, commandant of the German Army post in Le Puy, dissuaded Metzger from attacking. Years after the war, Schmeuling told Trocmé of the fateful conversation: "Colonel Metzger was a hard one, and he kept insisting that we move in on Le Chambon. But I kept telling him to wait. . . . I told Metzger that this kind of resistance had nothing to do with violence, nothing to do with anything we could destroy with violence. With all my personal and military power I opposed sending his legion into Le Chambon."

Stories like this one—about the power of nonviolence resistance—need to be lifted up and studied instead of forgotten.

Fortunately, the interdisciplinary field of peace studies emerged in the middle of the 20th century and has grown as an academic discipline with some 400 colleges and universities around the world now offering peace studies programs of one kind or another. The field of peace studies looks at root causes of violence in all its forms; strategies to prevent, end, and transform violent conflict through nonviolent means; processes that demand justice, promote healing, and create more equitable societies; and approaches to social change at local, national, and global levels.

In addition, on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., you'll find the U.S. Institute of Peace, established by Congress in 1984, to promote "international peace and the resolution of conflicts among the nations and peoples of the world without recourse to violence." The legislation

was initially introduced in the '60s and '70s by World War II combat veterans who were getting elected to Congress—Mark Hatfield of Oregon, Spark Matsunaga of Hawaii, Vance Hartke of Indiana, and Jennings Randolph of West Virginia. Their efforts were supported by a nationwide grassroots movement that called for the creation of a national “peace academy” on a par with the nation’s four military service academies.

National, nonpartisan, and independent, the United States Institute of Peace “is dedicated to the proposition that a world without violent conflict is possible, practical and essential for U.S. and global security. In conflict zones abroad, the Institute works with local partners to prevent, mitigate, and resolve violent conflict. To reduce future crises and the need for costly interventions, USIP works with governments and civil societies to build local capacities to manage conflict peacefully. The Institute pursues its mission by linking research, policy, training, analysis and direct action to support those who are working to build a more peaceful, inclusive world.”

Study war no more? Beat swords into plowshares? Some may dismiss Isaiah’s vision as a pipedream. Pie in the sky! It will never happen! But whenever I hear someone say that such a thing will never happen, I remember that people said the Berlin Wall would never come down, the Soviet Union would never fall apart, apartheid in South Africa would never end, and there would never be peace in Northern Ireland. Never say never!

Isaiah tells us that God’s promise is sure. One day, the world will live in peace under God’s rule. What is uncertain is when. The prophet did not know when. Nor do we. Nevertheless, Isaiah’s vision offers us hope for a peaceful future and challenges us to take part in bringing it about.

As we begin this Advent season, we prepare once again for the coming of Jesus Christ, who himself embraced Isaiah’s vision. We watch and we wait for the arrival of the one we call the Prince of Peace. Jesus comes to bring us peace. Jesus comes to show us the way. The real question for us is, will we follow him? Will we live by his teachings? Will we walk in his light?