

HOPE FOR THE HAUNTED

Advent 1 Year A

Is. 2:1-5; Ps. 122; Rom. 13:11-14; Mt. 24:36-44

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These days, it is pretty hard to get away from the fact that we live in a world that is dominated, certainly in the media, by visions of war—Afghanistan, Iraq, Israel. There's the ubiquitous war on terrorism—the war on drugs—the war against want, the war against waste. There are wars raging in families and within relationships. War has even taken to the streets as we see an increase in incidents of road rage.

Everywhere we look, someone's fighting someone or something. We fight for our rights. We fight to save our environment. We fight to be heard by our political leaders. And some people fight because they... well... just like to fight—perhaps they don't know any better. Sometimes it's right to fight—to stand up and fight for what you believe—but more and more, I believe it's our bloody-mindedness and our inability to deal with problems in a non-aggressive manner, that's the root of the problem. We have lost the art of subtle negotiation.

If we were to concentrate solely on all of these negative aspects of our society and how it affects our lives, we'd never want to get out of bed in the morning—life wouldn't be worth it. With all this stuff happening in our world, is it any wonder we have a society that's prone to stress and depression. Now, I certainly don't want to add to that stress and depression this morning by bringing all that stuff up. I simply want to highlight this as a fact of our society and to point out society's seemingly never-ending spiral into the depths of antagonism and bitterness because of humanity's propensity to want to blow everything up if we don't like it, for whatever reason.

Certainly, there are many things that concern us—many things that ought to get us upset, but there are also many things in life for which we can give thanks, daily—and perhaps it's these things that we need to concentrate on—especially if we are to adequately deal with living in this day and age.

The kinds of lives we live today, the kind of society in which we live and the kinds of fears that we face, are not all that unique. People of all ages have had similar concerns. People in the time of Isaiah, some 800 years before the birth of Christ, had the same kinds of uncertainty—perhaps it was even worse for them.

Israel had a troubled history. She was a tiny nation wedged between huge and ambitious empires that were constantly vying for superiority. Rarely during its 700-year history did Israel *not* live under threat. Wars were almost constant, some were devastating. For much of its existence Israel lived under the sovereignty of some other nation, unable or sometimes unwilling to establish its own existence in the world as God's people.

In the time of Isaiah of Jerusalem, Judah was a vassal state of Assyria. During Isaiah's lifetime the Assyrians would sweep in and totally annihilate the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and threaten to do the same to the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Judah had weak leaders who saw it more politically expedient to appease the Empire than to be faithful to God.

And yet there were those like Isaiah who could imagine a different reality—who could look beyond the suffering of the moment—who could look in hope for a time when Israel would be faithful and allow God to be God. Israel was tired of wars and threats—tired of the divisions that had torn her country apart after Solomon—tired of the instability of a world in which power and the oppression that it brings were the controlling factors in the world.

Some, like Isaiah, knew that God's vision of the world was much different. They knew that the God they served was the same God who had heard the cries of oppressed slaves in Egypt and entered history to relieve their oppression. And they knew that because God was such a God, he would not forever tolerate their constant oppression.

And so they hoped—and they dreamed. They dreamed of a time when God would enter the world again and bring an end to war and suffering—when he would establish his reign on earth and restore all creation to what he intended it to be. They dreamed of a time when the division that had torn their people apart and divided them into north and south might be healed and they could, once again, be a whole people under God. They dreamed of a time when, as Isaiah says, “nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore”.

Oh what a dream to have. Do you have that kind of dream for our world? Do you have that kind of dream for our community—for our church? With all the unsettlement around the world and the problems in our own community, perhaps we can understand,

to some extent, the deep cry of a people who longed for peace. *“Neither shall they learn war anymore.”* Wouldn’t that be wonderful?

For many of us, at least in the church culture in which I grew up, this concept was for some time in the future—some time out there in the “new Jerusalem” when God would fix everything up. There is no question that this is part of the vision of Isaiah. But I wonder if we have worked hard enough at making that dream of peace a reality for today—both in our society and within our own lives. Maybe we have depended a little too much on God transforming our spears and swords while we are still swinging them, instead of laying them down long enough to start making a few ploughshares.

And yet, Isaiah knew that finally we, in our own strength, would not be able to bring about that peace. He knew that even as we do our best, the world will not give in to our efforts. Still, he believed that it would come. Still, he believed in a future that was God’s future, a future in which the world would be restored to God’s intention for his creation.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent—which means “the Coming”. Peace on earth has already come to this world some 2,000 years ago in the birth of Jesus the Christ. But, in another sense it has not fully come yet. It’s not something that we can fully experience in our lives here, at this point in time. It has come only as a glimpse of what can be. It’s like looking through a small window into a beautiful mansion and only catching a glimpse of the wonders inside.

The fulfilment of the promises has brought new promises and a renewed expectation for the future. And so we too continue to dream Isaiah’s dream. We dream the dream of a divided people that God will bring wholeness in our communities and in our lives. We continue to live in the hope of a renewed world—a renewed world that begins with renewal in us.

When? How long? When will that day come? We do not know. But we hope...and we wait expectantly. We live today in the reality of what God, in Christ, has already shown us and what he has promised. And we look for his coming. We know that as he has come, so he will come again. When he comes, may he find us hard at work hammering our swords into ploughshares, and our spears into pruning hooks.

But, how do we get to that point? How do we learn to hammer our swords into ploughshares and our spears into pruning hooks?

There is the story of a wise old Rabbi who instructed his students by asking questions. He asked, "How can a person tell when the darkness ends and the day begins?" After thinking for a moment, one student replied, "It is when there is enough light to see an animal in the distance and be able to tell if it is a sheep or a goat." Another student ventured, "It is when there is enough light to see a tree, and tell if it is a fig or an oak tree."

The old 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."

The prophet Isaiah calls us to climb to the top of the mountain and look for the dawn—to look for the Lord's advent—the Lord's coming into our lives. Isaiah calls us to rise above our daily worries—to rise above our concerns and anxieties in order to take a look over the whole of our lives with all of their peaks and valleys. As Christians we do that in the vision or revelation of Christ, the Light of the World, God's gift to us.

And in *that* light—the light of the glory of the gospel of Christ—the light that shows up both *our* sinfulness and *God's* mercy—only by living in *that* light are we able to see in the face of a stranger or an enemy, the face of our brother or our sister. Only then, can we begin to truly prepare ourselves for Christ's coming—to prepare for the coming of God's peace in our lives and in our community. Only then can we begin to hammer our swords into ploughshares and our spears into pruning hooks?

"O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!" Says Isaiah (Is. 2:5). Let us all walk in the light of Christ—the light of the One who, by his light, illuminates our paths and shows the way we must go—and as we walk in that light, let us be found ready for his coming.

To him be all the honour, glory, dominion and praise. Amen.