Isaiah 2:1-5
1 Advent A Midweek + December 1, 2010
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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The Gospel for a World at War

The Word of the Lord from Isaiah 2: “He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for 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 anymore.”

This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

In the garden of the United Nations stands an impressive sculpture, given by the Soviet Union in 1959 and inspired by our text for this evening. A muscular man stands with his right arm cocked back and holding hammer, ready to bring it down and strike the sword in his left hand. On the base of the sculpture are inscribed the words, “We shall beat our swords into plowshares.” The United Nations website says that the sculpture symbolizes “man’s desire to put an end to war and convert the means of destruction into creative tools for the benefit of all mankind.”

It’s a nice sentiment, but…who is this man that desires to put an end to war? For a species that’s so peace-loving, there’s an awful lot of fighting going on. North Korea. Al-Qaeda. Somalia. Israel. Yemen. China. Colombia. At present, one watchdog website documents 37 different wars going on around the world today. As for those nations not currently at war, they’re also not leading by example and beating their swords into plowshares or tanks into tractors. They’re keeping their military and supplies up and current, because you never know when things are going to go bad along your own border.

The truth is that there will be wars and rumors of wars, just as Jesus said, until the end of the world. The truth is that, as long as mankind is sinful, there will always be people trying loot and kill and take what isn’t theirs. The truth is that there are only a couple of proven methods to “peace” in this world: one is when one nation has so much power and killing potential that other nations are afraid to launch hostilities. The other is when both sides have so much power and killing potential that starting a war would assure mutual destruction.

Despite the statue outside the U.N., everybody knows that the guy who beats his sword into a plowshare first is the first to die when the next war begins. That’s just the way it is.

And that’s what makes our Old Testament lesson sound so, well, impossible. "It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, and many peoples shall come, and say: ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob, that He may teach us His ways and we may walk in His paths.’ For out of Zion shall go the law, and the Word of the LORD from Jerusalem.” If one reads this and thinks it’s a prophecy about geopolitical events, then it means that the day is coming when all the nations will be allies with Israel—and that they’ll gladly bow to Jerusalem. So how’s the world doing with that one? I wouldn’t advise Israel to start beating swords into plowshares just yet.

Likewise, the second part of our text: “[The LORD] shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for 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 anymore.” If we’re waiting for all wars to end and an international group hug, we’ve got a long way to go. It’s not
going to happen if it’s up to mankind. No matter the intentions and desires of man for peace, there’s always going to be strife and war.

To borrow a verse from the Christmas season, “With men it is impossible, but not with God; for with God all things are possible.” When we consider this text, there are especially two things to rejoice in. One is that the Lord is going to accomplish what He promises in this text, and that what He will accomplish is far better than the dreams and sentiments of man. The other is that this prophecy’s fulfillment does not lie far away in the future, but is well underway right now.

This prophecy is about Zion and its people, but it is not about the Middle Eastern city of Jerusalem or those who live within it. In God’s sight, the “Israel” of these latter days is made up of those who share the same faith of Abraham, not those who share the same bloodline. St. Paul makes clear in Galatians 3:7 that “it is those of faith who are sons of Abraham.” Abraham believed God’s promise, believed in the Savior who was to come. If you believe in that Savior, Jesus Christ, who has come, then you are sons of Abraham. In other words, the Church is the new Israel, for they share the same faith in the same Messiah as Abraham did.

Zion in the Old Testament referred to the location of the temple in Jerusalem, because that’s the place where God lived with His people on earth. God doesn’t dwell in the temple anymore: He tore the curtain in two to prove it when Christ died on the cross. Where does the Lord dwell with His people now? In His Word, in His sacraments. So in these latter days, Zion is where the Word is preached and the sacraments administered. In other words, Zion is wherever the Church is, because the Church is wherever Jesus is found.

So way back here, in Isaiah 2, the Lord declares that all nations will come to Zion. Why? Because the Word will go forth from Zion. Now, listen to the Lord speaking to His disciples, from Matthew 28:19-20: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” Do you see? In Matthew 28, the Lord sends out His Word to all nations by sending out His apostles; and as His Word goes out, He brings many peoples to Himself. And what is His promise in Matthew 28? ”And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Where His Word is, Jesus is too. This prophecy in Isaiah 2 is all about the Gospel. It is the declaration that the Savior will come. He will gather people all nations to Himself. And He will deliver them from a world-at-war to His kingdom where they shall never learn war anymore.

This is a wonderful text for the start of Advent. Many texts and sermons speak of personal sins and afflictions. In this text, the Lord declares the Gospel in the context of a world where bloodshed and violence is the norm. When Isaiah first repeated this promise to the people, they were those who would witness the conquest of the northern ten tribes by Assyria, carried off and never heard from again. They would hear from Isaiah that the Babylonians were coming and would eventually destroy Jerusalem. Life was difficult enough and wars were brutal, and the fear of conquering armies very real. To them, Isaiah promised that the Savior would come and deliver His people to His kingdom of peace forever.

The promise still rings out today. This is a world at war. In the course of two days of my writing this sermon, North Korea shelled a South Korean island with artillery, an act that could grow into a horrific conflict. I also received news of a Lutheran couple, shopkeepers in Mogadishu, Somalia who were gunned down by Al Shabab militiamen, leaving behind four children who might well be kidnapped to terrorist education camps. The peace we enjoy here is not the norm in a sinful world, but a time of respite and restraint of evil granted by God. This prophecy in Isaiah is probably more meaningful to those who live in war-torn nations, who ache for the day when enemies are defeated and sudden violence is no longer the norm. Even so, you can probably remember the pit in your stomach on the day that the World Trade Center fell, and such a day could surely come again. So whether it’s an actual event or the fear of
the possibility, the devil will use it to do some terrorizing of his own. He would have you fear war and
deadth more than you trust God.

But the Lord declares to you that He is faithful to His promises. He came into this world—not as a
bloodthirsty, conquering king, but as an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes. He has conquered the
enemies of sin, death and devil—not by shedding the blood of others, but by allowing His own blood to
be shed; not by forcing others to submit to Him, but by being the truly ultimate sacrifice in order to save
others.

The Good News for a world at war is this: Jesus has not come just to make this a better world,
but to deliver you from this world to His kingdom in which there is no sin and death. He has not come to
lessen violence and war, but to abolish it. He does not do so by forcing all to grit their teeth and submit
to His greater power, but by offering His grace and mercy freely to all who will believe. By His grace, He
delivers to a kingdom where there’s no need for weapons and war, where people beat swords into
plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, where all of their attention can be focused upon harvest and
service, not vengeance and vigilance.

In this world, peace only lasts as long as there is enough power and weaponry to enforce the
peace. Evil is always seeking a way to overthrow and burst forth with violence. It will not always be so.
Christ has been born of Mary, died on the cross and is risen again to bring you to Himself; and in His
kingdom of heaven, violence and war and death are former things that have passed away. That news is
the light of the LORD in which you walk while in this dark world, and it is your sure deliverance, because
you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen