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11/27/22—University Presbyterian Church  
Isaiah 2:1-5

## SWEAT EQUITY

Advent begins this year in the shadow of yet more mass shootings. In recent days there was first the shooting at the nightclub in Colorado and then the one at the Walmart in Virginia, leaving many people dead, others wounded, survivors traumatized, grieving family members shattered, and the rest of us in the general population robbed of a sense that we can conduct our daily lives with the reasonable assurance of safety.

So the issue of peace is naturally on our minds as we enter the season of Advent. We all want peace. We want peace in our nation where the partisan divide grows uglier and leads to political gridlock. We want peace in our world, in places like the Ukraine where warfare claims lives and sends an economic ripple effect leading to hunger and deprivation across the globe. We want peace in our communities—an end to street violence, and racial violence, and sexual assaults, and child abuse. We want peace in our homes—an end to domestic violence, and alienation, and anger, and bitterness, and resentments.

The prophet Isaiah speaks to us today about peace. He gives his people, and us here today all these centuries later, a vision of what the world would look like when God's ways win out over the broken ways of this world. And in his discussion of peace, Isaiah offers us some symbols of peace.

Think about what symbols come to mind when you think about peace. I did a Google search of peace symbols and some of the top results are what you might expect: the dove, the olive branch, the round peace symbol that was used so frequently in the 1960's peace movement,

and the upright V-shaped gesture of a person's first two fingers. These are common peace symbols in our society and world.

But Isaiah's peace symbols are quite different. Isaiah offers us agricultural tools as symbols for peace. The plowshare and the pruning hook. Isaiah writes that when God's peace comes to earth, people will "beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks." The weapons of war will be converted into tools that sustain life.

As symbols of peace, the plowshare and the pruning hook are much more faithful to the biblical concept of peace than are any of our modern day symbols. The Hebrew word for peace is *shalom*. We sing about shalom each Sunday after we pass the peace to one another. The biblical concept of shalom is much more than just the absence of violence. Shalom includes the presence of justice and wellbeing. And that is why an agricultural tool like the plowshare or the pruning hook are fitting symbols for peace. Because agriculture involves labor. To grow carrots you have to get down on your knees in the dirt and dig, or hang on to the plow and turn up the earth. You have to walk the rows on a regular basis and weed and water. You have to bend over each plant when harvest time comes and pull it up. It takes effort to bring forth the fruits of the land. Labor is needed.

And the same is true for growing peace. Peacemaking is labor intensive. It isn't enough to wish for peace. If justice is to thrive in our communities, if all people are to enjoy a decent standard of living, if wellbeing of the body and the mind are to be realized, if racism is to end, if equal opportunities are to be extended to all children, we have some work to do. We have to cultivate peace, to do the work of growing peace, if we wish to bear fruit.

The term "sweat equity" has come to be used to describe the hard work that is required in order to bring an idea to life. The non-profit housing organization Habitat for Humanity which

builds homes for low income families, uses the term “sweat equity” to describe the physical labor that the prospective homeowners are expected to personally give to the project of building their home. Sweat equity becomes a non-monetary investment that someone makes in a project—the physical or mental investment of their labor and their time.

If we want peace, some sweat equity is needed. You and I have to make the investment, find the necessary tools, and undertake the labor if we wish to see peace.

Maybe it is helpful for us to think of peacemaking not just in terms of what the United Nations undertakes to solve global conflicts. Let’s think about peacemaking in terms of what we do in our daily lives and in our communities to strengthen relationships and to repair what is damaged. Sweat equity is needed if we are to heal the wounded places in our relationships, if we are to reconcile and bridge the alienation that has grown between us, if bitterness is to be set aside. An investment is needed by us.

Let’s think about peacemaking as the efforts we make toward addressing the food deserts that exist in some neighborhoods, or in working toward increasing the availability of affordable housing, or in ensuring that those incarcerated are treated humanely, or in learning about our own conditions of privilege and status.

Isaiah teaches us that there are two essential steps for making peace, for creating shalom. The first step is the laying down of our weapons. This is not an easy thing for many of us. Consider the weapons we hold on to for dear life. In the public domain, perhaps some of our cherished weapons might be our economic or racial privilege, our sense of entitlement, our “American” lifestyle that involves consuming more than our fair share of the world’s resources and thinking we have the right to do so.

There are also personal weapons we may be reluctant to lay down. Perhaps anger or bitterness over some wrong we have experienced, jealousy toward another, resentments, the desire to get even with another.

What weapons are you reluctant to lay down? The first difficult part of peacemaking is the laying down of our weapons.

And Isaiah teaches us that the second part of peacemaking is the picking up the tools for cultivating peace. Picking up the phone or the pen. Calling the therapist. Volunteering your time. Attending the meeting. Engaging in prayer. Having a difficult conversation. Extending grace and forgiveness every day.

Thomas Merton, the famous writer and theologian, supported the notion that each individual needs to work out peace in his or her own life in order for us to know peace on the larger scale. He wrote that, "Instead of hating the people you think are war-makers, hate the appetites and disorder in your own soul, which are the causes of war. If you love peace, then hate injustice, hate tyranny, hate greed--but hate these things in yourself, not in another."

Isaiah gives us a vision of a world of peace, a world where God's ways win out over the damaged and destructive ways of this world. This vision is not yet our reality. But Isaiah invites us to conduct our lives *as if* it were. He invites us to live into that vision, to make it a reality so far as we are capable in our own lives.

I hear Isaiah inviting us to become living symbols of peace. You in your life, me in my life, we can become living symbols of peace for others around us—signs of God's reality. So, this Advent, let's begin with ourselves. You and me. Let's begin each with ourselves. Let's take the concrete steps to become signs of God's peace for others and our world.

As far as symbols go, plowshares and pruning hooks are nowhere nearly as graceful as a dove. But plowshares and pruning hooks were built for doing work. Plowshares and pruning hooks are used to till the earth and tend the plants of the earth so that with faith and hard work, new life and new growth can emerge. And true peace never comes any other way.