

## Living God's Dream of Peace

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December 1, 2019

“Peace, Peace, Peace” is the theme of this year’s Advent season. In Isaiah’s vision of the coming Messiah he wrote—and I can almost hear Handel’s *Messiah*:

For unto us a child is born  
unto us a son is given...  
and his name will be called  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

This season we focus on God’s dream of peace, a this-worldly peace.

### I

One might ask at this point: Is God’s dream of peace meant for this world? Or for some age to come, beyond history, or in heaven?

We will be using the vision God gave to the prophet Isaiah this season. So, a word about the Hebrew prophets. Two words were used to describe them: A prophet was a “seer”, one who saw visions and saw Reality at its most real. And *nabi*, one who is “called.” A prophet is one who is given visions and who seeks to

apply those visions *now*, to the realm of “plain history, real politics and human instrumentality”, to use the words of Harvard’s Paul Hanson. In other words, *it is not too late* to act and to change! To use the words of the cowboy poet, the prophet comes “just before beyond redemption.”

The prophets warned of destruction if the nation did not turn back to the ways of God. But the prophet also gave us visions, glorious visions, of what the world could be if we turned and lived the way of God, the Torah. They had been given, to quote Longfellow:

The prophet’s vision

The exultation, the divine

Insanity of noble minds.

Some political theorists and theologians from the conservative side maintain that it is not only folly but also dangerous to try to apply God’s visions directly to history. They are meant only for the world to come.

Liberal political theorists and theologians have maintained that the prophet’s visions are meant for history, both in the prophet’s time and our own. I speak generally, but whole schools of political thought are based on these two positions.

Jesus, I believe, was clear on this as he taught us to pray: “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done *on earth* as in heaven.” So let’s look at God’s dream of peace through Isaiah’s visions and ponder how we might live God’s dream of peace today.

## II

The German writer Goethe wrote: “Dream no small dreams, for they have no power to move the human heart.” God and God’s Spirit will not let us dream small dreams.

God gave Isaiah this dream of peace, a vision so powerful it was something he not only heard but saw:

In the days to come the mountains of the Lord’s house shall be established as the highest of mountains and shall be raised above all hills.

Jerusalem itself is set atop a steep little mountain. But in the vision it will become the Himalaya of God where God will teach all nations and peoples the way of peace.

“All nations”, says the prophet, “will flow to it and many peoples shall come and say:

Come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord...That God may teach us God’s ways, and that we might walk in God’s paths.

God is the *teacher* here, and this is God's universal vision. All peoples, all nations, people of all religions are flowing up that mountain seeking to learn the things that make for peace.

In my study of the world religions, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism I have discovered wisdom teaching of peace that are remarkable alike. God is the teacher of the whole, wide world, and God is teaching still.

### III

God, however is not only teacher in this vision, God is also *judge*: "He shall judge between the nations and shall decide for many people."

There is no peace without justice. Peace without justice masks oppression, maintains inequality, protects the suffocating status quo. But justice upsets the evil equilibrium of injustice.

And what will be the outcome of true justice, a justice mixed with compassion?

And they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.

It is an altogether beautiful and compelling image, and a vision of what could be as we walk the ways of God the teacher.

At the end of President Eisenhower's time as President, the decorated general and war hero had a warning for the nation. On January 17, 1961, the President offered a dire warning about a threat to our democratic government. He called it the "military-industrial complex." This combination of big money, the military and the defense industry could endanger our democracy. The arms race would take money from the needs of the nation like schools and hospitals. He said, "We must learn how to compose differences, not with arms, but with intellect and decent purpose."

Fifty years later we have no less need to worry. Our continuous wars since that time have cost thousands of lives and trillions of dollars, dollars that could have been invested in many things to improve the lives of Americans. Any significant change in these priorities will bring great opposition from the military-industrial-corporate complex and those who profit from it.

The conventional wisdom is that the Soviet Union fell in part because of what the costs of the arms race did to their economy. Should this be a warning to us?

Swords into plowshares, spears into pruning hooks.

Stealth bombers into plowshares. Howitzers into hospitals. Our farmers, the custodians of our land, are suffering while the Military-Industrial-Corporate

Complex grows and grows. Nobody's going bankrupt with defense contracts.

When does a mania to be strong become a fatal weakness?

Shane Claiborne, an evangelical writer and activist, and his friend Mike Martin, a blacksmith are traveling around the nation putting Isaiah's vision into practice. Everywhere they go they set up a forge and beat guns into gardening tools. It is a protest against gun-violence afflicting our nation. The goal is not only transforming guns but to transform hearts.

That is the purpose of Isaiah's vision: To transform hearts. His new book, "Beating Guns", makes the case.

Last year, in conjunction with the organization *Protest Easy Guns*, some of us were part of an Interfaith Lie-in downtown as a witness to Isaiah's vision of peace. Our politicians in thrall to the National Rifle Association refuse, even in the face of a horrific train of mass shootings and every day gun deaths, to pass the common sense gun reforms that most Americans want.

#### IV

Let me move to the personal realm. Our thoughts and our tongues can also become weapons. I remember an old cartoon of a cocktail party. Instead of people's heads on the shoulders of the people decked out in their finest with cocktails in their hands, there were pistols, aiming words at each other or about

others. You may have heard the story of the town gossip walking down the street with her mouth closed. She was arrested for carrying a concealed weapon!

Jesus said that the commandment against murder should be applied to our angry, assaultive words. One such kind of talk is sarcasm. It literally means to “tear the flesh.” We make our clever jokes while our words bludgeon each other. (I have learned the lesson over the years to excise sarcasm from my sermons.)

The writer of James calls the tongue “a restless evil, full of deadly poison.” We can become verbal arsonists.

Paul gives us three criteria in the use of our words:

- 1) Is it edifying? That is, does it build up or tear down?
- 2) Is it fitting or timely? Is it the right time and place?

And

- 3) Does it impart grace?

Our social media has become a forest fire of deadly talk. So let's do our own bit of transformation and let the swords of our mouths be turned into plowshares, and spears of our words be turned to pruning hooks.

Isaiah's vision asks, can war academies be turned into peace academies? It's a long shot, but I know for sure that *churches* are called to become peace academies. We will have to turn from our cultural addiction of violence in all its forms. And we will have to learn to read the Bible aright—and take Jesus more seriously.

I've heard some people say their favorite Bible verse is “An eye for an eye”. As if Jesus never spoke to this. Ghandi had it right: “An eye for an eye turns the whole world blind.”

So what are some ways we can be a peace academy? I think co-hosting the Community Interfaith Thanksgiving service was one. Let's promote peaceful ways of resolving conflicts. And peaceable ways of living with those who are different. And discovering that place of peace deep within us, and living from that place of peace.

Do you remember this folk song from the 60's?

I'm gonna lay down my sword and shield

Down by the riverside

Down by the riverside

Down by the riverside.



I'm gonna lay down my heavy load

Down by the riverside

Down by the riverside

Down by the riverside.

Ain't gonna study war no more

Ain't gonna study war no more

Ain't gonna study war no more

The prophet leads us to that riverside today.

## VI

It won't be easy or automatic. Hate is often easier than love. And like forging metal on an anvil, peacemaking is sometimes strenuous, loud and messy work.

There will be days of lament, like the day in his last week when Jesus wept over Jerusalem and said

Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace. But now they are hidden from your eyes.

So, are you willing to be a “moral *minority*” in our world today and witness a way of life contrary to the world around us? It will take courage, and perseverance and resilience. But listen to what Jesus said: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the daughters and sons of God!”