

RESIST & RE-IMAGINE

Reflection November 18, 2018.

Scripture reading: Isaiah 36:1-3, 13-20; 37:1-7; 2:1-4



I don't know about you, but to me this time of year is, well, awkward; it feels uncomfortable. We're still two whole weeks away from Advent, but for the world around us and for the other god we worship, the economy, it's different. This Friday is Black Friday, the start of the Christmas season in the world of retail, and the start of the rat race of finding the right gifts and lining up for the next sale and big discounts: Red Thursday, Black Friday, Cyber Monday, Boxing Day. Shop

till you drop in a world that is preoccupied with getting the best deals and not so much with annoying stuff like the rise of fascism, fundamentalism, gun violence.

And this Sunday, just before this madness is about to be unleashed upon us once again, we hear a prophet speak of a world made right once again, because God promised so. Isaiah lived and prophesied thousands of years ago – he didn't know anything of the complex issues of our time, like climate change, terrorism, the arms race, and millions of refugees on the move – but he *did* know about wars and occupation and tyranny and living in fear, as they were about to get bulldozed by the Assyrian empire, the superpower of that time. And Isaiah knew that they needed a reason to hope, to help them make it through the tough times they were experiencing, and the even tougher times that were ahead.

And he does so in an unbelievably bold way. He's not trying to sugar-coat terrible events with platitudes like, "When God closes a door, he opens a window." No, he goes directly to the heart of the issue, and the issue is the vicious cycle of violence and injustice and war, a cycle that offers *no* hope, only despair and destruction, and yet we don't seem to be able to escape it. And he says, you know what? God has promised to break that vicious cycle. Those instruments of death? They will be turned into plows, into tools that sustain life. In fact, there will be no need to learn war anymore, armies will be done away with.

And according to him (and many other prophets), God's peace/shalom doesn't begin somewhere out of our reach with kings or presidents or politicians, it begins right here on the ground with ordinary people, God's people. *They* will lead the politicians and the presidents and the kings to peace by living into God's reality, by refusing to kill and by taking our own weapons and beating them into oblivion.

Now tell that to the "realists" who run the world, and they will tell you if that's what we believe, we're a bunch naive la-la hippy-dippy dreamers with lovely ideas that are completely out of touch with reality. But that's what it means to have faith. Faith is about believing what we hope for, and to act accordingly. Faith means being sure about what we don't-yet-see but we know is there.

Last week we heard that from another powerful prophet, Mica, who reminded us why we are here: to seek justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God. We talked about remembering, not just what's in the past but also *forward*, remembering God's promises of a world gone – not gone mad, but a world gone sane and just, a world filled with real peace, both inner peace and peace between people and nations.

it's about believing in a God who transformed death into life, as Jesus showed us – the same Jesus who broke that vicious circle of death to replace it with a caring circle of life, and now invites us to join in and do the very same.

If we really believe that the prophets were right and that real peace is coming, then we can't help begin doing it *now*. No point to wait for someone else to start; start now and live like God's realm of peace is already here, showing everyone what that can be like. Now mind you, it won't be easy because it goes against everything the world believes makes sense. But as far as I can tell, what makes sense doesn't really work. But it's so engrained in our way of thinking, we can't imagine it any other way. Violence and war are failures of the imagination.

Peace activist Shane Claiborne is one of those people who see it differently. A few years ago he got some welder- and blacksmith friends together to start turn weapons into farm tools. They took two AK-47 automatic assault rifles, and turned them into a rakes and shovels. Spears into plows...



They posted a video and pictures of this highly symbolic act of hope, and within days other people all over the world picked up on it and also started to convert weapons. It snowballed into a movement, a movement of hope. Handguns turned into guitars, machine-guns into violins. War metal turned into whimsical furniture and artwork.

As Claiborne puts it, "We refuse to wait any longer for others to do what the prophets tell us. We pray for peace and will continue to pray for peace, but we've also realized that sometimes we think we're waiting on God to act, while God may actually be waiting... on us. We cannot wait on politicians or kings or presidents; the new world the prophets spoke of begins with us, here. *We* are the ones that we have been waiting on."

The world-changing power of God starts with God's people on the ground, and cannot be stopped. But we keep forgetting, don't we? And so we wear ourselves out and get tired and

disillusioned, and we compensate for it by buying more than we should, always looking for the next amazing deal, and eating and drinking more than we should, racking up a big credit card debt; and we hate it – and yet we can't help but doing it all over again the next year. It's a real problem for a lot of people; only yesterday Felicia did a workshop to help people deal with that problem, to coach them to experience this season as less stressful and more meaningful and more peaceful. To re-imagine what it can be like, what it *should* be like.

That's also what Isaiah and Micah last week are talking about. They call us to re-imagine the way we've been doing things. To break the vicious circle of over-consumption and self-entitlement, and to make room to notice where God's reality is already breaking through into ours. Places where tools of destruction are made into tools of life, where people live into God's vision of hope, and poverty is eradicated. Not through decrees by presidents or kings, or bills by parliament, but through ordinary people on the ground, people like us. People who make time to bring lunch to enjoy together after worship like today, people who volunteer at the Manna for Health foodbank and the Brunswick Street Mission, people who visit the shut-ins.

But also people who take it a step further and dare to speak out against the collective insanity of war, the arms race, the obscene profits that are made by manufacturing and selling weapons. Ordinary people who won't be happy until nations stop fighting other nations, who won't be happy until we stop training for warfare. People who have a new way of thinking and who re-imagine the world as God created it to be, just like Isaiah and Micah did. Modern-day prophets like Shane Claiborne who are starting a movement of life and wholeness, a way of life that challenges our perceived need for armies and weapons; people who are not afraid to ask the uncomfortable questions, who are committed to God's idea that every person is precious, and to the idea that true peace will never be realised through the barrel of a gun.

When I hear the prophet's words I remember and *reimagine* a world with no armies and no poverty. The UN projects that US\$7 billion could eradicate all poverty in the world – that's what Canada spends every three months on its military; it's what the Pentagon spends every 5 days. Those numbers show us how completely misplaced our priorities are. And the fact that we somehow can live with it shows how seriously our imagination has failed us.

Isaiah reminds us of the power we have when we focus on the right things, when we fearlessly re-imagine life as it's meant to be lived. It's time to resist what the world tells us makes sense, because clearly it doesn't work. We are challenged to re-image the world, starting by beating some swords into plows.

How do we respond to this challenge?

Amen.

[The situation: Assyria, the superpower at the time, has destroyed everything in its path leading to Judah, including major cities, and now stands at the door of Jerusalem, threatening the same fate. Assyria already conquered Israel (Northern Kingdom), leaving Judah (Southern Kingdom) vulnerable. The Assyrian king decides to intimidate and bully the people of Jerusalem into giving up; instead of surrendering, King Hezekiah goes into mourning and asks the prophet Isaiah to pray for him and his people.]

SCRIPTURE READING NOV. 18, 2018

Isaiah 36:1-3, 13-20; 37:1-7; 2:1-4

Isaiah 36:1-3

In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah's reign, King Sennacherib of Assyria came to attack the fortified towns of Judah and conquered them. Then the king of Assyria sent his chief of staff from Lachish with a huge army to confront King Hezekiah in Jerusalem. The Assyrians took up a position beside the aqueduct that feeds water into the upper pool, near the road leading to the field where cloth is washed.

These are the officials who went out to meet with them: Eliakim son of Hilkiyah, the palace administrator; Shebna the court secretary; and Joah son of Asaph, the royal historian.

Isaiah 36:13-20

Then the chief of staff stood and shouted in Hebrew to the people on the wall, "Listen to this message from the great king of Assyria! This is what the king says: Don't let Hezekiah deceive you. He will never be able to rescue you. Don't let him fool you into trusting in the LORD by saying, 'The LORD will surely rescue us. This city will never fall into the hands of the Assyrian king!'

"Don't listen to Hezekiah! These are the terms the king of Assyria is offering: Make peace with me—open the gates and come out. Then each of you can continue eating from your own grapevine and fig tree and drinking from your own well. Then I will arrange to take you to another land like this one—a land of grain and new wine, bread and vineyards.

"Don't let Hezekiah mislead you by saying, 'The LORD will rescue us!' Have the gods of any other nations ever saved their people from the king of Assyria? What happened to the gods of Hamath and Arpad? And what about the gods of Sepharvaim? Did any god rescue Samaria from my power? What god of any nation has ever been able to save its people from my power? So what makes you think that the LORD can rescue Jerusalem from me?"

Isaiah 37:1-7

When King Hezekiah heard their report, he tore his clothes and put on burlap and went into the Temple of the LORD. And he sent Eliakim the palace administrator, Shebna the

court secretary, and the leading priests, all dressed in burlap, to the prophet Isaiah son of Amoz. They told him, “This is what King Hezekiah says: Today is a day of trouble, insults, and disgrace. It is like when a child is ready to be born, but the mother has no strength to deliver the baby. But perhaps the LORD your God has heard the Assyrian chief of staff, sent by the king to defy the living God, and will punish him for his words. Oh, pray for those of us who are left!”

After King Hezekiah’s officials delivered the king’s message to Isaiah, the prophet replied, “Say to your master, ‘This is what the LORD says: Do not be disturbed by this blasphemous speech against me from the Assyrian king’s messengers. Listen! I myself will move against him, and the king will receive a message that he is needed at home. So he will return to his land, where I will have him killed with a sword.’”

Isaiah 2:1-4

This is a vision that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem:

In the last days, the mountain of the LORD’s house
will be the highest of all — the most important place on earth.
It will be raised above the other hills,
and people from all over the world will stream there to worship.
People from many nations will come and say,
“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of Jacob’s God.
There he will teach us his ways,
and we will walk in his paths.”
For the LORD’s teaching will go out from Zion;
his word will go out from Jerusalem.
The LORD will mediate between nations
and will settle international disputes.

They will hammer their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will no longer fight against nation,
nor train for war anymore.