

ADVENT 1 – 2007, YEAR A

First Sunday in Advent – 2007: Isaiah 2:2-5

swords into plowshares, spears into pruning hooks

CHRISTMAS PLOWSHARES, PROPHETS OF PEACE

Hymns #141, 108, 131—carol our upside down Christmas, Isaiah the prophet has written of old, it came upon the midnight clear.

It has inspired generation after generation of history's most extraordinary peacemakers. From Isaiah: the prophet's inaugural word to launch the Advent season is perfectly and appropriately hopeful: 'Peace IS coming!' it shouts out to us. There is no doubt about it whatsoever. Though spoken 7 centuries before the coming of Christ, we haven't given up on it yet. It is a beautiful, powerful recipe for peace-time conversion. It has been believed and beloved by Jews and by Christians alike as THE hope for the world.

Prophets of peace still tell of it. And even now as we tell of it, swords are getting converted into plowshares, spears are being retooled for use as pruning hooks. Look for it – it's happening, everywhere.

When the people at Rosedale United Church in Toronto, Canada planted a sanctuary garden on the church grounds, the first shovel of earth had profound significance. It was dug with a simple little trowel. Yet this was no ordinary trowel – it had been forged by artist Ken Vickerson from the barrels of firearms confiscated by the Toronto Police Services Gun Task Force. The handle of the trowel was made from a piece of wood that had once formed part of a pew in the church building, (Doug Norris): "There is no gun, bomb, tank, factory, vacant lot – that can't be turned into something else; a shovel, a swing-set, a house, a garden. There is no fragment, no molecule in all of Creation that is not a vessel of God and so a means of life. (And) isn't this the core teaching of Jesus (too)? Where others saw useless and broken people, he saw humanity, possibility, and beauty, shalom unfolding."

Of course, we could, as many do avoid seeing the potential everywhere and in everyone for shalom. We could disregard, skip over the whole Advent emphasis on hope for a better world, and just go shopping. That's what our nation's financial and political leaders keep telling us to get back to doing. 'Back to business as usual,' the president and corporate CEO's beg. The spending must go on, the self-indulgence must continue unabated. Pay no attention to the child who's somewhere slaving in a factory sweatshop to produce what we consume. But don't we know it yet, that this unabated, crass materialism is dangerous to everyone, and that it foments an awful and unending kind of DISsatisfaction? The more stuff one gets, the more stuff one tends to want. Any deeper aspirations get stifled, more holy kinds of longings to heed the call of God are soon forgotten.

Of course, in a whole other way, the holier calling is dangerous too. The young Martin Luther King Jr. got a midnight call once. The caller threatened to blow his brains out, to firebomb his whole house if he wasn't out of Montgomery, Alabama in three days time. King later reflected on the agony he felt that night, especially as he looked down at his beautiful sleeping newborn daughter, realizing that someone might indeed break in at any time and try to kill not only him

but his entire family. But before the night was over, he also realized how fully another kind of call had come in to him, God's call to make peace, to stand up for truth, regardless of the cost. And from that night on he knew what he had to do.

We have reasons at first to be reluctant to accept our Godly calling, to pursue God's holier way. But "It may be our reluctance to pursue God's way that gives Advent its greatest potency," says Peter Marty. "If all of us had the least bit of passion for Isaiah's vision, and were less hung up with protecting our little fiefdoms, we wouldn't HAVE to WAKE UP for Advent."

Jesus has this way of interrupting materialistic, dead-end routines and saying, "Keep awake. Life is too precious to just go along with business as usual." During Advent, the message of the Gospel is that the Lord will come in the midst of "business as usual."

"The point of Advent is that change is coming, and our part is to provoke it into being, not to simply wait passively for its arrival. The point is to take Isaiah's words to heart: yearn for peace. Wake up to it, for goodness' sake, lest you squander your days on all the wrong things."

We are not hapless victims of our warring, dysfunctional past either, doomed to repeat the violent mistakes our parents may have made. God never tires of freeing us up to shape something better, something whole and just and endlessly creative. What an advent-ure!

They shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. They shall cut their mortar shells into flower pots, and bend their gun barrels into water spouts.

My favorite nearby public work of art is the outdoor sculpture garden at Magnuson Park consisting of those decommissioned Naval Submarine tail fins from the Cold War days of the 1960's. They stand erect in the tall grass, looking very much like a pod of orcas frolicking. The entire park was once a Naval Station, you know. The whole scene has lightened up a good deal since then. And that pod of orcas/decommissioned nuclear subs stand for what we all, at our best, hope for, what we all await.

Let's face it: the weapons of war are no longer useful to the people of God, except to be melted down as instruments to till the land and prune the fruit trees that will feed the hungry of the world. What we have paid for to wage war is going to be used now to make peace, to provide public art, to house, feed, and educate the dispossessed, the very ones that war has always displaced: the refugee, the one turned away at the inn who is an unwed pregnant mother named Mary, a refugee papa named Joseph, a baby to be named Jesus, and they're finding whatever warmth and shelter they can even now, amid animals, and under freeway entrances on top of cardboard, and in shelters we help to provide.

Advent speaks to us of waiting, but it does more than that. It helps us learn HOW to wait – to wait expectantly, watchfully, to wait actively, to wait in a way that provokes peace into being, to wait in a way that sees creative potential in everyone and everything. We need the season we call Advent to season our capacity to remain steady in our waiting, in our hoping, in our bringing God's dream for the future into the present here and now. We need the season we call Advent to teach us how to recycle and to transform the tragic past: mother shells into flower pots.

The first hymn we sung about the Australian summertime upside down Christmas reminds me of something Albert Camus once said: “In midst of winter, I finally learned that there was in me an invincible summer.” We people of faith who can call ourselves mature Christians are those who, like Camus, contain an invincible summer in our hearts. We’ve caught onto an Advent spiritual discipline which one could call a SEASONED kind of waiting. A seasoned kind of waiting already knows from experience something of the peace we await. So we don’t give up on it. We simply can’t and won’t give up on something we know to be that real and that good.

Knives into plows. Guns into trowels. Now – and forever more, Amen.