

Bending Toward Justice

Sermon by John Strommen on Isaiah 36:1-3, 13-20; 37:1-7; then 2:1-4

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We've been remembering veterans this past week, especially those from WWI on the 100th anniversary of "The war to end all wars"...if only it were true. And yet, sometimes, even in the most horrific circumstances, there is an outrageously beautiful reminder of something divine. Early on in WWI, in 1914, there was a famous Christmas truce - one decided upon not by the generals but by the soldiers.

(Stille Nacht film clip)

Now there's a contrast of two completely different worlds: one based on raw power and aggression, the other on peace and a common humanity. Which one is *more true* about us as human beings?

I think most would say, "Well, that one night was an exception. After all, the war resumed the next day." Raw power is more true. In fact, the Silent Night truce is straight from the heart of God and imprinted on our own hearts as an original blessing. It is more true than gunning each other down and this vision will prevail in the fullness of time.

Rabshakeh was on the side of raw power. Rabshakeh was the representative of King Sennacherib of the Assyrians and also has one of the coolest names in the Bible! The Assyrian troops had already invaded and overrun most of Judah. It might be hard to imagine, but this threat to Jerusalem was even more fearsome than the invading caravan approaching us from Mexico! Hard to know, though, since there's been no mention of it since, what, Nov. 6?

So, Rabshakeh stands before the gates of Jerusalem and addresses the messengers of King Hezekiah and the people of Jerusalem lining the tops of the wall: "Thus says the king, 'don't be deceived by your own King Hezekiah or by your Lord, the god you worship. They cannot save you from King Sennacherib. So, surrender to us and you will still have a good life, whether it's here or in the country you are exiled to.'"

Yup, that pretty much sums up world history, doesn't it? Whoever has the biggest armies and the best weapons pretty much get what they want, and the losers become slaves or servants of the invaders. And so it goes in our world: the win/lose scenario.

But in our text, the prophet Isaiah has a word for his frightened people - to summarize: "Thus says the Lord, 'Don't be afraid of Rabshakeh and King Sennacherib. I'll take care of them.'"

And sure enough, Assyria did not invade Jerusalem in 701 BC, but retreated, although the exact reason for this, historically, is unclear. OK, fine, so it worked out this time, but eventually, in 587 BC, Jerusalem was over-run and Judah was exiled for two generations. So, God chose to save his people in 701, but not in 587? Why not?

Chapter 2, verses 1-4 tell us why. Because God has much bigger plans than just rescuing his people, or any people, from this or that invading force. You see, for God, it is not a win/lose scenario, not an us vs. them sort of thing. Through the prophet Isaiah, God says to us that *all the nations* shall stream to the Lord's house on Mt Zion, in Jerusalem, so that he may "teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." He shall judge between the nations, a mediator for

many peoples; 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 any more.

Imagine, the global community using its resources for the purpose of building up life, not taking it. Certainly, this is the founding principle of something like the United Nations. However, when we hear a verse like “swords into plowshares,” we automatically think this is heaven being described, or just “Never-Never land.” Some place out of time in another reality, so it doesn’t really apply to us, does it? We humans are so broken we take certain things for granted. We weaponize creation, science and technology, and then think this is a normal state of affairs.

And yet, Isaiah’s prophecy begins with these words: “In the days to come.” Not at the end of all days, or in the days of the next life, but in the days to come and in *this world: at Mt. Zion, in Jerusalem*. That means that what is described here is to be *within history*. So says the Lord. It’s an indication, as MLK once said, that **“the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”** That means God has plans for where we are headed. Envisioned here is a society where resources are applied to the task of sustaining and nurturing life, not destroying it. These words from Isaiah about God are a calling to us, a calling to be a part of this realm that God creates, that shows up in our world as a beacon of hope, like Christmas 1914. Or MLK’s peace marches, or the world coming together to help rebuild Germany and Japan after WWII. There are in fact countless signs on our planet of people like you and me being called to the peaceable kingdom.

Indeed, it says, “...*they* shall beat their swords into plowshares...neither shall *they* learn war anymore.” Who’s “they”? People, like you and me and Rabshakeh. People like those soldiers in 1914. On that day, something dawned on those soldiers: “hey, wouldn’t it be better today if, instead of shooting at each other, we all sang Christmas carols together, drank wine and played soccer? On that day, a bigger truth settled into their hearts, bearing witness to our shared humanity, the power of hope and God entering human history to bring peace to our unrest.

Yes, of course, but the prophecy from Isaiah still doesn’t sound like real human history. In human history, there is conflict between nations. But notice that the prophecy acknowledges that there are conflicts, that God judges between the nations and mediates between the peoples. There is conflict, even in this vision. The difference is, the conflicts are not settled by destroying each other! The swords are beaten into plowshares, the spears into pruning hooks.

This calls for a response from us! We are called to participate in this kingdom that Isaiah describes, more than just offering “our thoughts and prayers.” Hmmm, a lot of talk about that topic, huh? We live in a violent country that is paralyzed to act meaningfully, but quite proficient at using prayer as a copout for doing nothing. Pope Francis tells us how prayer works: “You pray for the hungry, then you feed them. That’s how prayer works.” Did you see what he did? Whether it’s hunger, war, discrimination or gun violence, when we pray about it, we not only ask God to help us heal and re-order the world, we commit ourselves to work side by side with God to that very end!

We pray for victims of gun violence because we have a relationship with the God who is the source of life, justice and healing, then we beat our swords into plowshares, that’s how prayer works. Now, we’ll have many different opinions about what that metaphor “swords into plowshares” means. Look, we do live in a fallen world where there probably have to be guns and armies, but it’s hugely important for us to know where God is headed and how we’re a part of it. For us, how do we take Isaiah’s prophecy as a lure to the future and a calling to live

differently in the present, to work to transform a culture of death into a culture of life? How do we appropriate our resources and imaginations to disarm ourselves, literally, perhaps, and also figuratively disarm situations and attitudes? How can we find appropriate boundaries and limits to rein in this culture of death?

This brings us to a very important part of Isaiah's proclamation from God: it says that all nations and peoples will seek out God in Jerusalem and at Mt Zion. They will come to learn, and to work out differences peaceably. Clearly, this vision calls for unity and nations working together. This rules out nationalism and any nation putting itself above all others, two things currently being championed in high places that are, frankly, in direct contradiction with scripture.

As we prepare to celebrate Thanksgiving, let us have thankful hearts that God came to this world in Jesus to transform our broken cultures of death into cultures of life, and as MLK reminds us, the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. Let us give thanks that we get to be a part of working for that transformation and something that really matters. Amen.