

# The Peace of Christ

*Isaiah 2:1-5*

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**December 2, 2018**

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**2**The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. <sup>2</sup> In days to come the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. <sup>3</sup> Many peoples shall come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.' For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. <sup>4</sup> He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. <sup>5</sup> O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!

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Have you made your plans for Christmas? For many of you, this is something that was done weeks ago. Schedules were coordinated and tickets booked so that you could be home for Christmas, or so that your loved one could be home with you for Christmas. At our house, in just a few weeks, Chelsea will be home for Christmas. And then, on Christmas Eve, my sister, her husband, and my four nephews will be coming to our house. We can't wait to welcome them to our home.

But the best example of going home for Christmas might be our college students. The MSU students among us definitely have their plans in place for going home. When their last final is completed across the street, they will be the ones with the big smiles and overstuffed cars hitting the highway toward home. And for good reason. There is something natural about going home at this time of year. That's why it is reflected in the songs of the season: *I'll be home for Christmas, you can count on me... Oh there's no place like home for the holiday, no matter how far away you roam...*

This same sentiment is something we as Christians can relate to in our spiritual lives. No matter how far away we've roamed, when we, as prodigals, decide to go home, our heavenly father is waiting to rush to us with open arms, to welcome us home, and to celebrate our return. It could be said that going home, going to the right home, is the Bible's central theme. And the truth is...Advent is the quintessential time to think about going home.

Today is the beginning of Advent. The church has wisely given us Advent as a time to focus on going home. Oh, Christmas is coming. In fact, Christmas will come with all the cultural noise of the holidays. There will be twinkling lights and too much music, too many parties, and too much food. But before that, there is Advent. An excuse and a calling to sit still and practice waiting. To remember the story.

Advent is a time of hope and longing. Hope, peace, joy, and love – these are the familiar themes. But Advent is also a time of repentance. In the midst of the hustle and bustle of Christmas, we need the spiritual discipline of Advent. We're familiar with the liturgical season of Lent – those forty days prior to Easter – as a time for repentance and reflection. We think of that as a time for spiritual focus. Yet, we sometimes forget that Advent works the same way. That's why Advent is known as Winter Lent. It's designed to do the same work in us in preparation for what is to come.

Our text this morning from Isaiah fits this notion perfectly. Isaiah reminds Israel (and us) that we can't appreciate the promise without hearing the judgment. If there is no need, there is nothing for which to hope.<sup>1</sup>

On First Avenue, across from the United Nations in New York City, sits a small park, less than a quarter of an acre, named for Ralph Bunche, the first African-American recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. It's so close to the UN that people often mistake the park for being part of it. It's not. But the mistake is natural, because the park is also home to the famous "Isaiah Wall" which so many people naturally associate with the United Nations and its peacekeeping. There, carved into granite, is part of our scripture from Isaiah 2. There one can see the old prophesy of an obscure Hebrew itinerant, predicting a day that seems as far away now as it did then in ancient Mesopotamia-- a day

when nation shall not lift up sword against nation, and neither shall we learn war any longer.

This isn't just a text fitting for a worldwide organization working for peace. At both his first and second inaugurations, Richard Nixon took the oath of office while placing his hand on a Bible opened to Isaiah 2:2-4. Politicians, too, use this text with the best of intentions. I think every politician – Republican, Democrat, Independent, Conservative, Liberal – wants peace over war. And that's why this reminder of nations focusing on something other than war speaks so appropriately to them.

Yet, there are some of you here today that would say this notion seems “Pollyanna-ish.” That's not really how the world works. This kind of thinking needs a dose of realism. And the fact is, if you only read Isaiah 2, you might accuse Isaiah of the same thing.

But, Isaiah was a realist. In Chapter 1, his pictures were as graphic as the evening news:

Your country lies desolate,  
Your cities are burned with fire... (Paradise, California)  
And daughter Zion is left like a booth in a vineyard,  
Like a shelter in a cucumber field, like a besieged city. (Aleppo)  
Everyone loves a bribe  
And runs after gifts. (Politicians)  
They do not defend the orphan,  
And the widow's cause does not come before them. (Immigration)<sup>ii</sup>

Isaiah clearly knew what was happening in the real world. His pictures of violence and rebellion were stark and bold. It was to the political realities of the day that he spoke a word to Judah of prophecy and warning. Assyria was threatening to the North and the King was being tempted to make military alliances to shore up national security – perhaps even with Egypt (their former oppressors). For Isaiah, what was at stake was not a political issue, but a

theological one. Did the people have such a lack of trust that God's righteousness and justice would prevail?<sup>iii</sup>

But then comes Chapter 2, which begins "The word that Isaiah, son of Amoz, saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. We wouldn't describe it that way. We would say, "The word that Isaiah, son of Amoz heard..." Yet, seeing is exactly what was happening.

The word "see" more exactly means to "envision," "to conjure up in a vision." It implies that the words are brought to life. And in this case, it is perhaps even better said that the word has come in the form of a new way of seeing – not just for Isaiah, but for us as well.

Stephen Montgomery, a Presbyterian minister in Memphis, once described a trip he took to Monhegan Island, off the coast of Maine. He said that the trip over to the island that morning was smooth – the sea was like a sheet of glass. However, the return trip was a different story. A front had moved in and now there were blustery winds and violent, white-capped waves. Montgomery said he held up remarkably well for the first 15 minutes, but a volcano began to brew in the pit of his stomach. He said the pilot of the ship took one look at me and noticed that my face was the color an avocado and simply told me, "Sit down, find a point on the shoreline and focus on it."

Montgomery did just that, finding a point on the rocky shore that was a little higher than the rest – a point with a lighthouse. And he kept his eyes on it. After a while, his stomach became calmer, his head cleared, and he began to breathe deeply. "I am going to make it," he thought with brand new assurance.<sup>iv</sup>

This is how Isaiah 2 was to function for God's people. The mountain of the Lord's house (Zion) was to be established on the highest of the mountains, raised above the hills so that all could see it. Then, when the sickness and the moral ills of the day began to brew, Zion would serve as Judah's moral center, its point of orientation, and locus of worship.

But this point of reference wasn't just for gazing at. It was designed to prompt an action. This can be seen in the sequence of events described in verses 2-4. First, the mountain of the Lord's house (Zion) will be elevated and exalted. Second, there will be a pilgrimage of all peoples to the holy mountain. This is not a sight-seeing trip or a military campaign, but a

purposeful journey to a holy place. Third, as they approach, the people will sing a call to pilgrimage that expresses their reasons for coming to Zion – that God may teach them God’s ways. Fourth, the motivation for the pilgrimage is stated – “instruction” and the word of God go forth from Jerusalem. Finally, in setting out the results of all that has happened thus far, the name of the instigator of that future is uttered: God shall judge between the nations, who will turn their instruments of war into farming tools, inaugurating a permanent reign of peace.<sup>v</sup>

While this sequence described what the people would do, we shouldn’t lose sight of the fact that Isaiah 2 contains concrete ways that God would draw near to God’s people. Land, mountain, temple... These were several concrete ways in which God moved closer to God’s people and to the world.<sup>vi</sup> But in moving closer, we also shouldn’t lose sight of the fact that things would be different.

Isaiah’s vision might have stopped with weapons shattered to bits, robbed of their power to destroy. But, the vision does not affirm destruction of any kind, nor does it reject power. It is a vision of transformed and transforming capacity. Like swords and spears, plowshares and pruning hooks are tools made with human craft from the minerals of the earth and the growth of trees...Isaiah sees in this same creativity the capacity to transform the machinery of warfare into a technology whose sole purpose is to sustain the life of families in God’s good land.<sup>vii</sup>

One scholar I read this week suggested that in our world today, that might look like the dismantling of nuclear weapons, using their contents as fuel in civilian electric power stations. Another scholar suggested that it would look like swords transformed into stoves and washing machines, and spears into laptops and mopeds. I think I understand where that second scholar was going, but perhaps President Eisenhower said it best in his 1953 speech – A Chance for Peace:

*Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and not clothed.*

Like Isaiah, Eisenhower had a vision of what peace could look like. A vision of a more just world. A vision of what peace really looks like. One of my seminary professors rightly noted that “visions are present potential realities.” Said another way, it’s a picture of what could be...today.

And that’s where verse 5 of our scripture lesson leads us to. “O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!” This was how the vision would become present reality. To walk in the light of the Lord was to turn to the ways of peace, the ways of shalom. Shalom is not a mere absence of war. Shalom is wholeness, unity, oneness. Shalom is the vision of Genesis 1, a vision of balance and order, a vision of designed unity, a place where the light of God is the first thing made, a light that makes possible the very existence of all on the earth. Walking is a metaphor for conduct and commitment to a moral path. And light is also what makes it possible to follow a path.<sup>viii</sup>

Isaiah sings to us his wonderful image of the church that will be – visible and welcoming to all. A movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. And in doing so, he also points to how Advent works for us. Over the next four weeks as we move closer to the celebration of Christ’s birth, the church is not just one more stop in the midst of the holiday season. Instead, it is a place to focus on when the rest of your life is dizzying and spinning out of control. A place of great discipleship. A place where the word of the Lord will come and teach us. Yes, it will require us to wait. But it is in our waiting that we will learn. And each week, we light a candle and in their light, we see more clearly. And by the time we add all of our candles together on Christmas Eve, it will become clear; brightly illuminated for us. Just as land and mountain and temple were concrete ways that God would draw near to his people, so, too, in candles of light, bread, and cup, it becomes clear how God has drawn near to us. As the wonderful candle hymn says it, when the Christ candle is lit on Christmas Eve, *the sounds of God with us ring clear*. But I love even more the next the line: *and signs of a cross in the distance appear*.<sup>ix</sup> This is the reminder that what Isaiah saw was not an illusion. On the mountain, in the city, Jesus fulfilled history for all peoples. *The Word once made flesh, yet the Word ever near*.

These liturgical responses to the divine promises concede that we live in a world of wars and rumors of wars, but they also promise that if Judah will start living as if these promises were true, this would be life-changing. Isaiah believed that the extent to which the Jewish people themselves became living light, the nations would be attracted to that light and come streaming to learn the ways of God and to hear the word of the Lord.<sup>x</sup> God was serving as a divine magnet, drawing all people to learn God's ways and God's paths. Their task was to anticipate this future by starting to walk in God's light.

The coming peace is God's, but it is promised to us. And like Israel, Isaiah calls us to act in the meantime as though the promise is ours. We cannot usher in the kingdom of peace. But, by God's grace, we can practice peace-within ourselves, among our families, in our congregations, in our neighborhoods, for our world.<sup>xi</sup>

Yesterday, I watched a lot of college football. And each game ended the same. I'm not talking about the final score. Each game ended with a post-game handshake between players and between coaches. Their teams had battled against each other, but at the end, they declared they were at peace.

In worship, we have similar actions which speak to something greater. We bow our heads in prayer, we stand to sing, we give an offering. These actions reinforce our values.

The ancient tradition of passing the peace is another action that reinforces a value – our identity as peacemakers. From the beginning, Christians have exercised this practice. “Peace be with you” was a greeting Jesus himself used with his disciples. The apostle Paul opened each of his letters with “Grace and Peace be with you all.”

The idea of this practice comes from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 where he states, “if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.”

This text serves as the basis for placing the Passing of the Peace appropriately between the Service of the Word and the Service of the Table. Having been convicted and instructed by God's word to us, we must seek to make things right before coming to the table. The

table of the Lord is not a meal eaten among enemies, but among family and friends. For it is at that table where we are reminded of the reconciliation we have with God through the saving acts of Jesus Christ. But, before we come, we should also be reconciled one to the other.

And so today, and throughout Advent, we will pass the peace before coming to the table. This is not a meet-and-greet. Instead, it a reminder of the peace that Christ brings. And it's a reminder that we can practice peace.

The peace of Christ be with you...and also with you.

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<sup>i</sup> Gaiser, Fred. *Commentary on Isaiah 2:1-5*. [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=7](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=7)

<sup>ii</sup> Modified from Lundblad, Barbara. *Commentary on Isaiah 2:1-5*. [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1896](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1896)

<sup>iii</sup> Snook, Lee E. *Interpreting the Book of Isaiah: Yahweh's Changeless Purpose in the Changing History of Zion*. Word & World, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN. 1983. [http://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/content/pdfs/3-4\\_Luther/3-4\\_Snook.pdf](http://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/content/pdfs/3-4_Luther/3-4_Snook.pdf)

<sup>iv</sup> Montgomery, Stephen. *Closer Than You Think*. Sermon preached November 28, 2010. Idlewild Presbyterian Church, Memphis, TN. [http://day1.org/2384-closer\\_than\\_you\\_think](http://day1.org/2384-closer_than_you_think)

<sup>v</sup> Tucker, Gene M. "The Book of Isaiah 1-39" in *The New Interpreters Bible Commentary*, Vol. VI. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001.

<sup>vi</sup> Chan, Michael J. *Commentary on Isaiah 2:1-5*. [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3116](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3116)

<sup>vii</sup> Portier-Young, Anatheia. *Commentary on Isaiah 2:1-5*. [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=776](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=776)

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>ix</sup> "One Candle Is Lit" *Chalice Hymnal*, #128. Words: Mary Anne Parrott, 1988. Music: William J. Kirkpatrick, 1895. CRADLE SONG.

<sup>x</sup> Brehm, Alan. "Living Light" at *The Waking Dreamer*. <http://thewakingdreamer.blogspot.com/2011/02/living-light-isa.html>

<sup>xi</sup> Gaiser.