

What We Are Waiting For: Peace

TEXT:
Isaiah 2:2-5
Psalm 122
Matthew 24:36-44

December 2, 2007

For a good portion of the time that Carolynn and I lived in Washington, D.C., the nation's capitol was also known as the murder capital of the world. Handgun violence was an everyday occurrence. The number of shooting deaths in the city was astonishing, averaging more than two a day. I remember very well a three-week stretch where there were seven murders within a two block radius of our home on Capitol Hill.

In the face of this violence, the voters of the city passed a law banning handguns. This is the case you have been hearing about in the news this past week that will come before the U.S. Supreme Court who will rule whether that law, passed overwhelmingly by the voters of the District of Columbia, is constitutional.

When the law went into effect in the early 1990's, thousands of people began to surrender their handguns to the police. Eventually, many of those guns were turned over to an artist by the name of Esther Augsburg. For the next two years she worked to shape over 3,000 guns into a 16-foot-high plow blade. The trigger holes were filled in so that the guns could never be used again. In September 1997, a gigantic crane lowered a four-ton sculpture to its permanent cement base. Esther Augsburg

titled her sculpture, "Guns into Plowshares."ⁱ

This morning marks the beginning of the Season of Advent. Advent is a time of waiting, of watching, of preparation. We wait, not just for the Christ child to be born, but we wait, too, for God's good and gracious reign to come. We wait for the end of the age when God's presence will fill the earth. We wait, we watch and we prepare for something better, something wiser and something more honorable than the world as we now know it. This is, and has been, the hope of the people of God from the very beginning.

As we gather during this Season of Advent, we will reflect on some of those things we are waiting for in our world and in our lives. This morning our focus will be on peace; we are waiting for peace. Next week we will be thinking about wholeness and then the theme of renewal and fulfillment. Each week we will add a new element to our Advent tableau, a visual image of our theme for the week.

This morning, we acknowledge that one of the things we are waiting for is peace, God's peace. Peace and peacemaking are central themes in the Biblical narrative. Remember the words of the angels as they announced the birth of the baby to the shepherds in the fields? "On earth, peace among those whom God favors." (Luke 2:14) It is

for the peace spoken of by those angels that we await.

We see this longing for peace in the Psalm for this morning. The people of God are encouraged to pray for the peace of Jerusalem. Three times the concern for peace is raised in this text. How much more relevant can a scripture text be when the leaders of several nations have just concluded a meeting on peace in Jerusalem for Palestinians and Jews?

As writer George MacLeod put it:

*Where people are praying for peace the cause of peace is being strengthened by the very act of prayer, for they are themselves being immersed in the spirit of peace.*ⁱⁱ

The great longing for peace is also reflected in writing of the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah wrote during troubling times some eight centuries before Christ. In order to secure its future, the leaders of the nation formed an alliance with Assyria (which is modern day Syria).

Isaiah was deeply disturbed by this alliance. He saw it as a betrayal of Israel's God. He called the people back to the true object of their loyalty. To a people in uncertain times, he offers a vision of a new day. He spoke of a time in the future when all hostilities will cease and the nations would stream to the temple of the Lord. As the

people of the nations come, God would be God to all people. Things like nationalities and borders would no longer be significant; theological persuasions and ethnic identities would not divide. All would be one.

This is, without a doubt, a wonderful vision, a powerful dream for the human race. This beautiful verse from the prophet Isaiah – “They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks, and nations shall learn war no more” – is one of the phrases from the Bible that has captured the imagination of people throughout the centuries. These words are etched into the foundation of the United Nations building in New York. It is an image that brings forth the universal and eternal longing of humankind for peace.

The political realist may dismiss the picture as being merely wishful thinking; many will read it as poetry but not very practical in a world built on swords and spears; and for others it will only be a dream. It is, without doubt, a wonderful vision, a powerful dream. But for Isaiah, this vision is not just a dream, or poetry, or wishful thinking: for Isaiah it is the ultimate will and gift of God for the creation.

Both the psalmist and the prophet capture a deep desire of the human race. What we are waiting for is peace.

In the most recent issue of *The Christian Century* magazine, John Wimmer wrote about his father’s experience in WWII in the South Pacific.ⁱⁱⁱ After his father’s death, Wimmer found his father’s war-time journal containing the stories of the war

his father could never tell. While there were moments of sheer terror, there were more often the moments of waiting, longing, hoping. As he witnessed the suffering of the native peoples in New Guinea and the Philippines, he longed for them to live in peace again. He longed for his own chance to be free from the constant discomfort and fear of death. He longed for an end to the violence and waste of war. He longed to be with his family in worship in their Methodist Church in Milroy, Indiana.

John Wimmer’s father was someone who was “enlarged in the waiting.” *Enlarged in the waiting* is a phrase used by Eugene Peterson in his paraphrase of the 8th chapter of Romans. “The longer we wait,” Peterson wrote, “the larger we become and the more joyful our expectancy.”

This is what happens in this season of expectancy, this season of longing, this season of hope: Learning to live the Christian way of life means longing to wait in hope when the world around us does not share our vision or our values. We wait, and hope to become enlarged to bear the sorrows and fight the injustices of the world. We wait and dare to hope that even in the darkest times, we will glimpse a more just and merciful world in the coming of the Christ child.

But turning to the Gospel of Matthew, we see that the road ahead will not be easy or quick. It is still out in the future, beyond our reach, beyond our comprehension, uncertain and mysterious. In this text, which speaks of the day when Christ shall come again, Jesus reminds

us of the faithful waiting of Noah. Noah, knowing nothing about the future except that God controlled it, proceeded with his work, ignoring the taunts of his neighbors and the uncertainty of his family.

Taken together, these three texts for the first Sunday of Advent prepare us to hope and to wait: to hope for the peace and justice of God’s reign among us and to wait for signs of God’s presence on earth. Indeed, waiting for peace in the Season of Advent brings us to take a long view of life and faith.

Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador was a prophet for his people and a martyr of the faith. For speaking out on behalf of the poor in his country and for peace during the civil wars of El Salvador in the 1970’s, Oscar Romero was assassinated by a government death squad while he was serving communion to a group of sisters in a hospital chapel. One of his most inspirational homilies is a most fitting conclusion to a message on the first Sunday of Advent, when we acknowledge that what we are looking for, is peace. His message is titled, *We Are Prophets of a Future Not Our Own*.^{iv}

It helps now and then to step back and take a long view. The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God’s work. Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us. No statement says all that could be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith. No program accomplishes our mission. No

set of goals and objectives includes everything. This is what we are about. We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities. We cannot do every thing, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing this. This enables us to do something and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.

In Advent, we are waiting for peace. With the words of John the Elder in the Revelation,^v Come, Lord Jesus, and grant us thy peace. Amen.

ⁱ "Art of Sharing: Esther Augsburg shares her faith, convictions and ideas through art." *Montpellier*, James Madison University, at jmu.edu/monty/ArtOfSharing

ⁱⁱ *Resources for Preaching and Worship, Year A*, (Westminster, 2004), 2.

ⁱⁱⁱ "Agony in Advent: Lessons from A Father's War Journal," by John R. Wimmer, *The Christian Century*, November 27, 2007, 8

^{iv} "We Are Prophets of a Future Not Our Own," found at <http://www.pcusa.org/spiritualformation/hungryhearts/archive/thurman.pdf>

^v Revelation 22:20

**This sermon delivered by
Kent Winters-Hazelton
First Presbyterian Church
2415 Clinton Parkway
Lawrence, KS 66047**