

UNLEARNING WAR

Isaiah 2:1-5 / Psalm 122 / Matthew 24:36-44

I don't know why it always surprises me that the lectionary does not usher in the Advent season with soothing, comforting texts like a shot of pumpkin spice latte with whipped cream on top and an oatmeal raisin cookie on the side. Instead, the words of the prophets, the Psalmists, and New Testament writers confront us with the reality of life in unsparing words.

The beginning of this liturgical year is a whopper. And Isaiah's ancient words, written thousands of years ago, could not be more apt. They speak of our human inclination toward war, violence, and strife. They remind us that our rhetoric serves as a precursor to picking up swords and spears—or in our context, guns, tanks, fighter jets, killer drones and tactical thermo-nuclear weapons. A friend of mine used to say, "The violence we carry in our minds and hearts and on our tongues today will spill out into our streets tomorrow. Prophetic words, indeed. Another week of gun carnage

in our country, another week of missile strikes against Ukraine, ever more efforts of banning books, and ratcheted up rhetoric on social media prove Isaiah's point and forcefully underscore his words.

In the midst of all this chaos, both within and without, the prophet Isaiah and the writer of Matthew's gospel set the grand vision of the bible—a vision of which we are reminded every Advent season: life on God's Holy Mountain, as Isaiah puts it. The kingdom of God, as Matthew and all the other gospel writers call it. It is the grand prophecy of a life which, to our human understanding, seems unnatural: "Nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war any more," Isaiah assures us. "The lion and the ox shall lie together and eat straw. The child shall play over the den of poisonous snakes without being bitten, and no one shall hurt each other on God's Holy Mountain anymore," as he says a little further in the book.

This is the grand vision of a world and a life in which Russians and Ukrainians will pull up chairs and feast at one table. A world in which people will not have to fear for their lives because of their identity anymore. A world in which Republicans and Democrats will not demonize each other anymore and work together constructively for the good of all. A world in which all goods will be truly shared and everybody will have more than enough, and the leftovers will put our Thanksgiving leftovers to shame. It is a grand vision. It is beautiful and peaceful. It is a vision of wholeness, of shalom, of heaven.

What's unsettling, though, is that neither Isaiah nor Matthew tell us how long we have to wait for this promised life and world. Nor does it say when it will finally arrive and put an end to all the mess in our world and the tensions in our own lives and hearts. "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," Isaiah rhapsodizes. "But about

that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in the days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage ... and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away. So, too, will be the coming of the Son of Man, ” Matthew’s gospel tells us. Again, not really a cuddly reassuring message for a worry-free Advent season, if you ask me.

But thankfully the ancient texts do not leave us in despair about our predicament of not knowing when things will finally get better and God will be all in all. Instead, they provide us with a roadmap to the opposite of war, violence, and strife—peace. Not the mere absence of conflict, which is always temporary. But with true peace. It starts, as the Psalmist tells us, in worship. “Gather in God’s house,” she commands the people. “Pick up a garden tool

instead of a weapon and plant a garden,” literally and figuratively speaking. “Seek the good! Say ‘Peace be within you.’”

Why plant a garden? I am glad you asked. I don’t know if you are a master gardener or not. Doesn’t matter. I am certainly not. But I have some game which was passed down to me by my father, and to him by his grandfather. One thing I know about gardening is that it commands your attention—all year round. You take care of the seeds, till the soil, plant, water, water some more, pray for rain and good weather, harvest whatever God’s creatures have not munched on or ruined, eat what grew, can what you could not eat, share with your neighbors, cover your flower beds before the first frost—and then you do it all over again. In the meantime, you may be so tired that you have to go to bed early, sleeping soundly because you are content with a good day’s work. It’s hard to imagine that while all this work is going on that we would have time to think about how best to do harm to others.

But that is not the only reason why the biblical writers want us to beat our swords into plowshares. The most important stories of scripture do not happen on the battlefield. They happen in gardens. There is the story about the garden of Eden with its trees of life and the knowledge of good and evil, and how human beings learn how to take responsibility for God's creation and for their own lives. There is the story of the garden of Gethsemane where Jesus is betrayed and handed over to the Roman oppressors. There is the story of Mary in the garden where she mistakes the risen Jesus as the cemetery gardener. And finally, there is the story of the new Jerusalem, a garden in which the waters of life flow freely, and the leaves of the trees planted alongside this river are for the healing of the nations.

So, at the beginning of this Advent season, today, the scriptures do not hand us a cuddly Jesus who takes us by the hand to lead us into the promised land unscathed. Instead, we get a Jesus who points the way for us toward a life and a world as God intended it

in the first place. Jesus alone cannot accomplish this. He needs you and me. He needs our minds and hearts to turn away from violence, clean up our rhetoric, lay down our weapons and pick up a trowel, rake, or pruning tool to make this beautiful garden into which we were planted more livable for all people. Again, in the words of the Psalmist, Advent words of reassurance and of hope:

Pray for peace.

May they prosper who love you.

Peace be within your walls
and security within your towers.

For the sake of our relatives and friends

We will say, "Peace be within you."

For the sake of the house of the Lord our God,

We will seek the good of all.

May it be so. For you, and for me. Amen.

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