

**Sermon preached
by Doug King
November 28, 2004
Advent I
Isaiah 2:1-5**

Welcome to Advent. We find ourselves at the start of a liturgical season that brims with promise as we await the arrival of a Savior child to make all things right in this world. Our text from Isaiah does not disappoint with its sweeping transformational language of turning swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, of a world where there is no more war. I do not know about you but I am more than ready to sit back and watch God set all of these things in motion. I have seen enough devastation and killing via CNN to almost become numb to the reality of all of those lives that have been lost and are being lost each day across the globe. If you are listening this morning, Lord, we are ready, bring on the peace.

Of course there is more to this text than these promised words of transformation. We are not told of the process by which we will get to this joyful reign of peace.

We are told that all of the nations of the world will stream to Zion, to God's chosen people that they might learn of God's ways. We are not told of what motivates the nations to recognize that Zion has a direct connection to God.

Whenever I hear this text I am reminded of another text that we read in our Sunday morning Bible study. It is from the nineteenth chapter of Exodus. God gives Moses these words to share with the Israelites, "I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now, therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation." You see the world cannot find its way to God and God's peace without a demonstration of faithfulness.

As followers of Christ, we too believe that we are chosen people of God, called to demonstrate God's way to others. As we journey through this advent season we will hear of God's extraordinary promises of transformation of our broken world. We will await the arrival of a Savior child to lead the way. But if we believe that we are merely spectators on the sideline, we are sorely mistaken. We have a role to play in all of this. We must be the ones to demonstrate God's kingdom values. We must be the ones to show the world an example of the peace we have been promised.

The risk in all of this is that we confuse our understanding of our role and become arrogant. When our political leaders mangle the faith and suggest that the United States as a country has been chosen by God to lead the world their arrogance places them outside the biblical witness.

What I am speaking of is what we can be doing in all humility to beat swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. Each week we light our peace candle and we pray for peace. We have taken the first and most important step of turning toward our God to show us the way. But what do we do next? Advent is a season in which we are called to be preparing for the arrival of the Christ child. Exactly how are we preparing for the Prince of Peace? How should we be preparing for the Prince of Peace?

In case you are thinking that I am about to give you some sure-fire answer to this question, let me assure you I have none. But I am convinced that praying for peace is the first step on a longer journey. In this very dangerous and complex world of ours we must move forward not with blind naivete, but with a wisdom born out of the tension between the reality of today's world and the promises God has made us for tomorrow's world.

A line from a hymn comes to mind, "Lord let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me." The place we start is ourselves and the peace we start seeking is not some diluted sense of the word such as lack of war, but the full sense of peace, shalom. The Jewish word "shalom" is a word of blessing, of a life of fullness, of completion.

Shalom is a word that reaches beyond issues of conflict or lack thereof, to a larger sense of harmony.

So what is our role in reaching this deeper sense of a world in harmony? It certainly starts in our own hearts. Not that we are called to be all smiley and calm, if that were the case I would be in big trouble. But we are called to deeply place our trust in God that we might be freed from the ways we run around in circles in our minds and hearts. In the chaotic nature of our busy homes we are called to create a safe and loving place for every family member. In our workplaces we are called to care for the welfare of our colleagues and question whether the work we do is good for the world in which we live. As a congregation we are called to seek the peace of this city. Every eleven o'clock news report of another shooting shows how far we have to go. But it is not solely stopping the shooting, it is about helping to create opportunity and community for those who struggle in the city of Buffalo. As a congregation we are called to be engaged in our larger world as well. As a nation we are living in a time of war. We are called to be informed about what is going on in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the Sudan, and across the globe. We need to challenge ourselves to do theology the way in which Karl Barth told us we should, with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. What does God's word call us to do in these difficult days? Let us debate and argue with each other as we love and respect each other, that we may act in the world together.

We, the congregation of Westminster, need to be reminded that we are a holy chosen people called to the humbling task of preparing for the Prince of Peace. Let us prepare in our hearts and in our homes; in our workplaces and in our city; and in our

world for the one who will transform our warring broken-ness into just community, joyful harmony, complete peace. What must we do that swords may be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks? What must we do? Amen.