

The Vision We Choose

Two weeks ago in a sermon I spoke of an intriguing idea gleaned from my friend, Rabbi Ed Stafman. The two of us were being interviewed about the interfaith work we do here in Bozeman, and the young journalist was curious about our motivations. Rabbi Ed spoke about two visions in the Bible describing what it will be like when Messiah comes, or comes again, he added. One, he said, prevails in books like Ezekiel, a vision of violence, destruction, and suffering before the judgment. The other is best known in the book of Isaiah, a vision of peace, harmony, and justice. And the reason the Bible gives us two such opposing visions, he said, is that we get to choose. The journalist looked at each of us and asked, "What do you believe?" And together we responded, it's the Isaiah vision, the peacemaking vision, which inspires us to do what we do.

It's true, beating swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks is not the only word in the Bible concerning "when Messiah comes," nor the only word regarding war and peace. In the book of the prophet Joel, the same Isaiah prophecy we read today is reversed, and agricultural implements are pounded into weapons. Joel reads, "Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears; let the weakling say 'I am a warrior.'" (Joel 3:10) The Bible's tradition of the holy war is just as real as the prophet Micah's repetition of Isaiah's vision of nations coming together in peace. Choosing a single text and then closing the book can be dangerous, because of the many different voices present in our holy book. It was written over centuries, and thus contains many words for many situations. Still, we affirm that the Bible gives guidance for difficult moral choices. And yes, we get to choose which vision of God's coming we want to dedicate our lives to, which one we will work for, the one in which one we will invest our hope.

Hope is today's word on this first Sunday of Advent, hope which is based on God's promise, hope which arises from faith that it is our good and gracious God whose horizon determines the direction of the world and who will speak the final word. Writer Robert Corin Morris says, "I've come to believe that hope springs recurrently in us because it springs ultimately from the heart of God. Faced with the ignorance and rebellion of humanity, God hopes for the best, too." ("Hope Springs Eternal," p. 6, in *Weavings* vol xxvii, no. 2) Hope is sorely needed in our world today, and I am here today to say that hope is here for us.

Now for the people of Isaiah's day, who lived with warring nations all around, hope looked like all those nations coming together at a place of peace. And that place looked like the holy city of Jerusalem, holy because God's Temple stood on a hill within the city. There, those varied nations and peoples would hear God's instructions, and learn together to walk in God's ways. Imagine, said the prophet, Egyptians and Assyrians, Babylonians and Medes and Arabs and Syrians as well as Judeans and Israelites gathering peacefully, united by the same purpose. Try to imagine that today, picture a map of the Middle East, those same nations and peoples gathering in peace. It seems impossible, or at least implausible, but peace emanating from Jerusalem is Isaiah's vision, given to him by God.

Last fall, four people from the Holy Land traveled together to Bozeman to share with us how they work together for peace. One was an Orthodox Jew, one was a Christian pastor, one was a Bedouin Muslim imam, and the fourth was the imam's wife, a noted leader in her nation of Israel. They told us of their ongoing work of dialogue, and of their symbolic act once a year called the "Jerusalem Hug." Each

year since 2007, Israelis and Palestinians, as well as people from around the world who care and pray for the peace of Jerusalem, have gathered around the walls of the Old City, hand in hand, shoulder to shoulder, to sing and pray and give this beloved spot on the planet a giant hug expressing their shared hope for love, respect, and unity among all people. It is a contemporary enactment of Isaiah's prophetic vision.

Closer to home, many of the thousands of people who have converged near the Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota see their gathering as a fulfillment of Native American prophecy. In an interview earlier this week, a Lakota woman named Dorothy Sun Bear told a reporter, "It's the most beautiful thing that happened in my life. We're told it was going to happen and we're here experiencing it." The prophecy of which she spoke is that tribes which fought in the past would converge to defeat a common enemy, and indeed, several hundred tribes from across the continent have come together at Standing Rock.
(npr.org/2016/11/21/502918072/for-many-dakota-access-pipeline-protesters-the-fight-is-personal)

The closer to home it gets, the more we can see that the people involved aren't perfect, and that there are always more sides to the story. The escalation of tension at Standing Rock this week raises our concerns for law enforcement officers as well as for the several thousand people encamped there. Yet this encampment, this coming together of people of every tribe and race and ethnicity is first of all a gathering for prayer. Those who came together back in April came together to pray for the protection of the water. The media use a sort of shorthand, calling them "protesters," but prayer, not protest, continues to be the purpose of the people. Yesterday at another gathering for prayer held at the headwaters of the Missouri River, I heard two young women, one white and one Native, describe their visits to the Standing Rock encampment, the camp of the Sacred Stones, earlier this summer. They spoke of being welcomed warmly, immediately included in the community, and feeling love and peace emanating from all whom they met.

Prayer is desperately needed for this situation which the world is watching. Tensions will continue to grow this week as hundreds of veterans are expected to converge on the area on December 4 to show their support for the water protectors, and an eviction notice has been served by the Army Corps of Engineers for December 5. Energy Transfer Partners has until December 31 to make the pipeline operational and fulfill its contract with oil producers, who probably would be happy to get out of the contract they signed when oil prices were high. Ironies abound. The potential for conflict is very high. Will history be repeated, or will the prayers result in a new story told at Standing Rock?

In the midst of the world's news stories, we as Christians are called to keep our eyes and ears open to how God keeps hope alive for us all. We are people of hope. So we listen to the vision of Isaiah, and trust in its truth. And we listen to the vision articulated by those who dream of justice and peace in our world, both in days to come and in the days which are already here.

For we believe that is God's dream. Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa, who lived through apartheid and its dismantling, whose heroism and grace are admired the world over, names God's dream this way.

"I have a dream," God says. "Please help me to realize it. It is a dream of a world whose ugliness and squalor and poverty, its wars and hostility, its greed and harsh competitiveness, its alienation and disharmony are changed into their glorious counterparts, when there will be more laughter, joy, and peace, where there will be justice and goodness and compassion and

love and caring and sharing. I have a dream that swords will be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, that My children will know that they are members of one family, the human family, God's family. My family." (2004, *God Has a Dream*, Doubleday, New York, pp. 19-20)

And Tutu reminds us ever so gently that God invites us to be partners in fulfilling this dream. Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God, the reign of God, here among us and not yet fully here. Like Isaiah before him, Jesus' prophetic voice gives hope and summons our response. Will we join him, and walk in the light of the Lord?

My friends, there are so many ways this hope for peace is threatened in our world. And that means there are so many ways we can act to keep hope alive. We can pray, we can speak up, we can use our power to build peace where we live, in all the spheres of influence we have. And lest you think "I'm just one small person, I'm too young to make a difference, or I'm too old to make a difference, I'm not smart enough, I'm not strong enough, I'm not influential enough, and I'm too busy anyway," let me remind you that all those excuses are the reason Christ has brought us together. Because collectively, we are strong enough, smart enough, influential enough, and with God, hopeful enough to live the vision Isaiah voiced and Jesus shows us is God's desire for the world. We can stand up for the justice that brings peace that gives hope.

We get to choose. Swords or plowshares? Spears or pruning hooks? Weapons or tools which enable the earth's abundance to be shared with all?

Christ came to guide our choice. Christ is coming to fulfill the choices we make as we follow him.

Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!

