

“All I Want for Christmas is a Pruning Hook”
Isaiah 2:1-5
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In case you hadn't noticed, even though it is only mid-November, Christmas is almost here. The malls are full, Christmas carols are everywhere, the mad rush is on. My personal Christmas season, however, begins each year with the last phone call before the U.S. Thanksgiving holiday, when I hear: “You kids need to get me your Christmas lists. I don't want to be shopping at the last minute.” And every year, I remind my mother that I don't really need *anything* and that she really shouldn't feel obligated to spend any money on me and that, in fact, it would be perfectly fine with me if she got me nothing at all, or, if she really had to, to make a donation in my name to a worthy charity. Heaven knows we have more than our share of accumulated junk already. But my annual protestations fall on deaf ears and whether or not I submit the requested lists, there is a package waiting at the door and my mother has yet again found something I cannot live without and has therefore fulfilled her cosmic parental duties. And you know that the monetary value of the gifts she has given to me and my siblings is always within a dollar or two of being equal!

But this year, after reading the second chapter of Isaiah, I've had something of an epiphany: Rather than go through the usual explanation of why I want nothing but her love for the holiday, I know what I'll ask for (in addition to a Chinese chef's cleaver I've already thought of): This year I am planning to say,

“Ma! All I want for Christmas is a pruning hook!” and see what happens. Have no doubt, my mother could find such an agricultural implement and convince FedEx to ship it, no matter how large or sharp it might be, and get it here in time for Christmas. But can she find the real pruning hook in which I am interested?: the kind made from what used to be a spear. It’s true, I’ve always considered my mother something of a miracle worker, from issuing kisses that take away boo-boos to making the holiday gift expenditures come out exactly even, but even for her, finding the thing I would really like for Christmas might be a little difficult, so that’s why I’m just asking her for the pruning hook. You see, what I would really like for Christmas is a very simple little trinket, if a little hard to shop for: an end to war and violence and hunger.

“In days to come,” says the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, “they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” From God’s mind to Isaiah’s lips to our ears comes a vision of a future in which there truly is peace on earth, a future in which nations are no longer at war, when their weapons lay useless as they study Torah instead of battle plans, when they need not leave any free space at the bottom of a list of war dead such as might be read at a Remembrance Day service like this one. But although it’s the ultimate in military downsizing, and a beautiful vision of a world without war, there is more to God’s shalom than an absence of war. You see, in Isaiah’s time, and perhaps

even in our own if you think back to days of the phrase “guns or butter,” the choice to arm the military came at the expense of arming the farmers with the tools they needed to make land productive. It is not *only* that the weapons of war would be useless in a time of peace, but that their raw materials could then be used for farm implements. In those days, if you used the metal for swords, you couldn’t use it for plowshares. In the vision of peace that Isaiah presents, war is practiced no more, and therefore, neither is famine and hunger. Indeed, even today, there is a link between the two, for in most places where there is famine, there is war. God’s shalom is comprehensive.

In the early church, one of the conclusions early believers quickly arrived at was that Jesus Christ was that comprehensive shalom, the fulfillment of this and many other prophecies of Isaiah and the other prophets, so that, for example, in the violent death of Jesus in Jerusalem, that Holy City had indeed become the peaceful center of the known universe, the starting point from which the nations shall adore God and recognize that there is no other God. In him is the promised peace which passes all understanding. According to the fourth century church father Bishop Athanasius, Christ transforms even the Barbarians who, and I quote, “cannot endure one hour without weapons” into farmers who, when they hear about Christ “straightaway instead of fighting turn to husbandry, and instead of arming their hands with weapons they raise them in prayer.” Individually, we experience peace in our hearts and lives in our journeys with Christ. Great

movements for peace have been started by Christians. True peace has come in the name and person of Jesus Christ. Right?

Well, if that is true, why are we still fighting with one another? You see, the claim that Christ had fulfilled this prophecy was strongly challenged by others, among them those whom Christians soon began to persecute. They argued that Christians were easily the most warring of faiths and by no means had turned their weapons to agricultural implements. They might claim to have peace in their hearts but they also have blood on their hands. And so the Church itself, as it became part and parcel of the Roman Empire, could no longer deny its complicity as Christian nation lifted sword against Barbarian nation. The challenge to “learn war no more,” was a huge one for Christians who found themselves in the military, by choice or by conscription. Indeed, it was this reality that gave rise to consideration about whether or not war could ever be considered just or justifiable. The so-called Just War Theory, one of the many legacies of the church father St. Augustine, is one still being studied and applied in our conflicts today, testimony to our enduring struggle with the allure of sword and spear.

And so the verdict is still out on whether the first coming of Jesus has in fact brought the peace that Isaiah foretold. I suppose we shall have to wait for the second coming to know for sure whether this is as good as it gets where Zion is concerned. In any case, we are left with Isaiah’s beautiful vision, a vision of God’s shalom he lifts high, as high as Mt. Zion, as high as the highest mountain

imaginable. It is indeed lifted high enough for us to see, and therefore to want, to desire with all our hearts. Hey, I want it for Christmas, I want that pruning hook, for who among us would not want a world without war and violence and hunger. But is the vision also lifted so high that we find it unattainable? We might like to reach the top of that mountain but is it so high it is daunting? Maybe it is too much for us? After all, we are but individuals up against the powers and principalities arrayed against us. What would we have to do, what would we have to pay, or give up, to make the ascent of Mt. Zion? What measure of our power would we have to expend or to give over to God to be able to go forward?

If we can overcome our awe at the enormity of the task before us, it is tempting to think that the way forward is by working at it a little harder, by dedicating ourselves more fully to the task, or by coming up with new strategies, but I'm not sure that approach would work any better than it already has. You see, if it were only a matter of refinements or reinforcements, I think we would have accomplished it already. We've tried, haven't we, to make peace? Every generation has tried and every generation has failed. And so what I think Isaiah is telling us is that peace will not come when we are all working at it a little harder (although that might help!), but rather, when God is good and ready. That is a hard pill to swallow, to be sure, to wait on peace like children waiting for Christmas, but no child ever moved Christmas up to the first day of December by trying harder. All our inclinations are to put our collective shoulders to the

grindstone and make peace happen, even if God doesn't work that way. You see, the salvation of the world is no different than the salvation of our souls. We can't bring either by the sheer force of our own wills. But God can bring both by grace. You see, the vision of the establishment of Mt. Zion, of Jerusalem as the highest point on earth and the place to which all nations will inexorably be drawn, is God's own doing and God's grace writ large and high. It is the same grace of God found in Jesus Christ, he who saves us when nothing we can do will earn us God's love and favor, things bestowed only by God's grace and not through our own efforts. Peace is possible because God's favor rests upon us and we can then go and cooperate with that grace.

Friends, all I want for Christmas is a pruning hook. I want peace in the world. Maybe you want it too. I think however that we need to learn again the lesson that just as we cannot make God love us, we can't make people be peaceful to one another. It is rare that we ever make anyone do anything. The harder we try, the more likely we are to fail. It is like trying to catch that proverbial greased pig; the tighter you squeeze, the more slippery the swine becomes. Typically, the harder we try, the sooner we fail, and the quicker our frustration sets in and that just makes us try harder all over again. It is a never ending circle. We see it in families, in nations, in governments, and in churches. Whether it is an attempt to get a child's room tidy, or to stop a spouse from biting his fingernails, or to keep an annoying employee from annoying others, or to get

people off welfare, or to reform government, or even to stop a terrorist, the harder we try to *make* someone do something, the harder we will fail, and the greater our disappointment will be.

There is, however, an alternative. Instead of trying to be *peacemakers*, we might try being *peacebringers*, people who bring forward peace as a response in gratitude for God's overwhelming grace. Instead of trying to make people be peaceful because we want them to be, by golly, we can bring peace and show others it is possible. We can move beyond *saying* that peace exists and that you must have it, to showing that it does exist, by taking the first step of peacefulness. This is peace bringing that is not coercive but cooperative, peace bringing that is not enforced but inviting, peace bringing that is not hesitant but heartfelt. It may mean stepping out in faith and making the first move to break a stalemate. It may mean accepting that each side in a disagreement has some validity to its points, some subjecthood, some real identity, some story that we may not fully understand. It may even mean sitting down together at table and breaking bread and pouring wine with people with whom we would never dream of dining, as Christ did with the "unwashed masses" of his time. It is not a coincidence that plowshares and pruning hooks are paired together in Isaiah and elsewhere in the Bible. You see, plowshares break up the soil that we might plant wheat for bread, and pruning hooks prepare the vine that we might have wine. And if there is to be enough bread and enough wine for all those meals to take place, it will be because

we have responded to God's grace by bringing the peace of Jesus Christ into the world God has given us. May God help us to live in that grace and see the New Jerusalem. Amen.