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Advent 1A
Peace, Seattle
November 28, 2010 epk
Isaiah 2:1-5

SWORDS TO PLOWSHARES, SHARDS TO SUNCATCHERS

Wherever you happen to live in the Western third of the state of Washington, you know where you are by reference to a single dominant feature of our landscape: 14,410 foot Mt. Rainier.

I remember first feeling the pull of the Mountain as a student at PLU. Whether I was walking across campus, looking out my dorm window, or running at the track, my eyes inevitably drifted to the eastern horizon, looking for signs of the Mountain.

Finding where the mass of Mt. Rainer was in relation to wherever I happened to be at the moment, became second nature; an involuntary act. And it didn't matter if the day was overcast or clear—in every condition, the Mountain called for my attention.

And over and over again, on those days when the clouds finally cleared and the Mountain raised its head, it stood bigger, taller, and grander than I had remembered.

Today, in the first words from the Lord for this first Sunday of the new church year, the prophet Isaiah unfurls a vision of that time when God's holy mountain will be lifted above all others.

THE TIME IS COMING, he sings, when the Mountain of the Lord, more majestic than Mt. Rainier, will be lifted up as a beacon, drawing peoples together from all nations, all races and cultures.

And God will teach them to follow God's ways instead of their own aimless paths; setting the stage for truly marvelous things to happen:

- Swords will be beaten into plowshares, instruments of war into tools for cultivating the land,
- And a complete reorientation of humankind will usher in a new day; the day of true shalom.

It is a day we long for, a day we hope for, a day we pray for; a day which, as human history proves, cannot come by way of our own ability or ken; and yet, a day whose light and joy and peace God is calling us to make our home even now.

BUT HOW ABSURD IT ALL SOUNDS, THIS HYMN FROM ISAIAH!
Especially coming on the heels of the devastation he has just described in the previous chapter. (1:7-9)
Listen:

> Your country lies desolate, your cities are burned with fire;
> in your very presence aliens devour your land;
> it is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners.
> And daughter Zion is left like a booth in a vineyard,
> like a shelter in a cucumber field, like a besieged city.

Is it not these verses which offer a much more accurate rendering of the world we know? The world of Darfur and Iraq, of Afghanistan and Haiti, of North and South Korea? The world of the devastated and despairing? The warring world we have seen too much of believe that it is possible to walk through the door Isaiah opens in chapter 2?

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And yet, that is what Isaiah invites us to do. And so, this morning, we must ask, what might walking through the door Isaiah has opened for us, look like?

As Dr. Mary Jenson and her companions climb the stairs of the building in the Al-Am'ari refugee camp just north of Jerusalem, they step on thousands of shards of broken glass, casualties of the latest Israeli Defense Force's siege in the beleaguered Palestinian community.[1]

Everywhere they looked, they saw damage and destruction: crushed cars, metal doors broken and twisted, bullet and missile holes in buildings, rock walls toppled and windows shattered—the result of tank and helicopter attacks and the systematic damage by heavily armed soldiers.

An ELCA Missionary and assistant to Bishop Dr. Munib Younan of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jerusalem (ELCJ) Mary is accompanying the Bishop on a pastoral visit to the Lutheran Church and School of Hope in Ramallah.

Later, their trip will take them to Beit Jala, a town adjoining Bethlehem on the west, and to a special place of reconciliation called Abraham's House. The mission of Abraham's house is to bring the children of Abraham—Jews, Muslims and Christians—together.

During youth camp one recent summer, the older children, ages 9-12, developed a play that "portrayed a situation where a mother and father were having a conflict with two neighbors. As the play developed, the children in the family spoke to their parents about how to resolve the conflict, convincing them to work it out."

The result of the drama, of course, was a peaceful resolution of the neighborhood conflict and the reconciliation of all the people. "Violence breeds violence" is a theme Pastor Ansara of the Church of Hope touches on frequently. Christians have a special role and call to be reconcilers.

At a workshop in Bethlehem, Pastor Mitri Raheb, pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church, displays ceramic, mosaic, and glass artwork created by people from the town and the refugee camps. Much of the work has been destroyed, adding to the broken glass underfoot.

But like beating swords into plowshares, the artists have already begun to develop a new art form, using the broken pieces of glass destined for the trash heap, they work to create mosaics and hanging "suncatchers" in the form of Bethlehem stars and Christmas trees.

"Instead of throwing the glass away," says Pastor Raheb, "we are transforming the broken pieces into beautiful wholeness."

This is the God-given work of the Lutheran church in Palestine—to transform broken lives and a broken society into God's newness, giving fresh hope for the future.

Sisters and brothers, what is our God-given work at Peace this season? How will we walk in the light of the vision God revealed to Isaiah? How will we serve as witnesses to the all-encompassing shalom that is God's vision for our planet?

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[1] Excerpts are taken from Mary Jenson's account of the visit first published in *Lutheran Partners Magazine,* September/October 2002, Vol. 18:5. For the complete article, go to: http://archive.elca.org/lutheranpartners/archives/broken.html

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How will we proclaim with our own lives and in this community that God is not a tribal deity we can claim as our property, but rather the Sovereign of Isaiah's vision who holds the congregations of Palestine and the congregations of West Seattle in a single embrace—and calls all peoples to learn how to beat swords into plowshares and shards into suncatchers within the neighborhoods and communities in which they/we live?

Leo Tolstoy, the Russian author perhaps best known for his magnum opus, *War and Peace*, once described a childhood memory of lying on the floor and gazing up at his mother as she did needlepoint. The back of her fabric, which was facing him, was riddled with knots and frayed ends of thread. When she finally showed him her handiwork in its final form, he was amazed to see a beautiful and symmetrical pattern of flowers and birds.

Tolstoy likened this experience to our attempts to understand God's handiwork, when we often see only the madness and chaos of our surroundings. Only after this life has ended, mused Tolstoy, would we look upon God's completed embroidery.[2]

As Isaiah ushers in Advent, he reminds us there is a larger drama unfolding in this universe, and God is leading that drama in ways that are beyond our ability to decipher or to know. But with the eyes of faith, we are granted the vision to see that this is true.

As we begin this season, and the new church year, we hang our hopes on God's design. We see beyond the despair and tragedy that engulfs so much of the world; we look beneath the brokenness and superficiality of what this season, in our consumer world, has become; and we look into the eyes of Immanuel. Waiting, watching, keeping vigil, we ready ourselves once more to be surprised by God's infinite love making it's way into our world in ways we least expect.

Amen.

[2] From *America's Four Gods: What We Say about God and What That Says about Us.* Paul Froese and Christopher Bader, New York: Oxford U Press, 2010, p. 14.