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Isaiah 2:1-5

IN THE DAYS TO COME

In the mountains of Afghanistan, a battle is raging. Now that is probably not news to you, but I'm not talking about the battle involving predator drones and IEDs. I'm talking about the real battle, the same one that is being waged in countless different ways across the globe. This is the battle for our souls, and Afghanistan is just the literal representation of the figurative battle that wages in all of us. As Christmas rolls around, and we celebrate again the birth of Jesus, I'm left to wonder once more— what makes for peace?

In his book Three Cups of Tea and the follow up Stones Into Schools, Greg Mortenson talks about the events and travails that caused him to form the Central Asia Institute and to work for peace via the vehicle of education. In a recent interview on with PBS, Mortenson made the following observance about how and to what end children in Afghanistan are being educated:

...99 percent of madrasahs are very similar to confirmation or catechism or the bar mitzvah. But there are these other extremist madrasahs, mostly funded by Wahhabi (PH) adherents. And Wahhabi is one of the—the most extreme of the four Sunni sub-sects that propagates a very violent type of ideology.

And these have flourished. They take the brightest young boys from the madrasahs. They send them to Yemen and Saudi Arabia for about a decade, indoctrinate 'em into the very you know, violent, militant type of Islam, send 'em back to the village, make him the richest man. And he has—he's—required to have four wives and have a lotta children.

So if you look at that—the Wahhabi plan or—or the extremist plan, it is to—it's over about 100 year plan. And we're trying to tackle this with billions of dollars and bipartisan bickering. And we—really—really need to look at education, I think, as an alternative. Even if we could invest one percent of the money that we put to the war on terror in education, it could have profound implications.

So, in Mortenson's mind we have to take a very long term approach to peace.

It has to start with education because that's what forms our worldview, our value system and even our psyche in most cases. A thousand predator drones won't defeat this because the educational process is raising up a whole new generation to replace the ones that any drone might take out. At the root of this battle for our souls is education. Education offers us a chance to imagine different worlds, to look for "days to come", as Isaiah puts it, with hopeful hearts. Education gives us vision...a way to "envision" something beyond what we know now. It is a way to beat the swords of war into the plowshares that will feed people something that will nourish them, not indoctrinate them.

What is not appreciated about vision is that it really isn't action. It is anticipatory action. It is action with a long purpose. Planting a garden...nursing a child...a little seed money for those rainy days. We are called so often in our lives of trust to live into something...to reach for something that isn't here yet but is coming. It is the repeated story of our faith tradition...a people in the desert longing for home, listening to an improbable dream, wrestling with God, marching into the wilderness, listening to the voice of an angel tell you the impossible and believing it...finding the strength and resolve to say, "Not my will but yours, Eternal One". Those are all actions, true, but they are actions with vision...done not to produce something for now, but with an eye towards something far off in the days to come. In the same way education is a vision – it is hope for the future...a way to carry us beyond our current darkness.

It is significant that the season of Advent begins as we descend into winter. The days grow shorter and darker...our drive home at night is often punctuated by the very harsh reality of almost complete darkness. The starkness of the autumn colors is now giving way to the blandness of winter – brown grass, barren trees, a dull sky that sends our bodies into a bit of hibernation even though it is largely figurative. In the midst of all of that, we look to a birth. We look to the promise of spring, even those of us who like winter. The break of new grass, the first bloom of the bulbs we planted, the outbreak of new green leaves on the branches...it means that the circle continues and even the most callous among us take some stock in that.

That's what the lighting of these candles is – a ritual of “the days to come”. And in Isaiah's vision, these “days to come” bring a whole new direction...they bring a new house of God that is not ours or theirs, but is open and welcome to all. Isaiah is looking at what is – A Jerusalem full of division and strife, war and misery, inequity and injustice – and he is imagining what will be – a city of peace, equity and divine presence. Everything that is held high now – the love and worship of money and power, the cruel authority of unjust power, the obviousness of “might makes right” – will be leveled...the high places brought low...and what will be elevated is the authority of justice, the power of compassion, the love of mercy.

Isaiah sets this “house of God” on the “mountain of the LORD”, which his audience knew as an actual place – the Temple on the Mount. That was God's house. Razed to the ground by Rome, the only portion that still remains today is the western wall of that former temple, what we call the “Wailing Wall”. All that I have to do is think about where that wall sits today to know that Isaiah's vision has a long way to go to be realized. The Middle East is hardly peaceful and Jerusalem can't in any way be called a city of peace, equity and divine presence.

But this is Advent – it is long vision time. We have a long winter to go before spring gets here. Oh wait a second, Chris. You're not going to have another "pep rally" sermon, are you? You know, one of the ones that talks about how we have to keep "fighting the good fight" because in the days to come something glorious is going to happen? You're not going to preach about the promised land or the second coming, are you?

Well, no I'm not. Frankly with all apologies to the great R&B singers Sam & Dave, I think that the "Hold On, I'm Coming" routine is inert. The second coming is not what Advent is about anyway – it reminds us to get in touch with the first one. But Advent isn't really about what is coming, though we surround ourselves with waiting language for the next 4 weeks. It is about gaining the vision to see what has arrived, what will arrive and what is in the process of arriving. Spring doesn't just drop down out of the winter sky one day – it settles in – and that is what Advent announces...the settling in of a remarkable, improbable and unbelievable story of God's love for the world expressed not in an angel army or a giant flood but in the cries of a tiny infant who will grow to be a itinerant peasant who challenges all our notions of power and justice.

There is a movement taking place called the Advent Conspiracy. It has started in some churches and spread from there. It highlights the possibility of Christmas without so much commercialism and what it calls "restoring the scandal of Christmas by substituting compassion for consumption". It stems from this idea that Advent is a season for telling the story of promise, hope and revolutionary love that Jesus' birth signifies. That is what Christmas is about, though we have gradually turned it into a season of stress, traffic jams and family debt, just as we have gradually made ourselves into people governed by things that are not God's will for us. The Advent Conspiracy is an intentional effort to get us all in touch again with the amazement of what Christmas signifies. It is an attempt to get us to slow down long enough to have some different vision...to see the places in our world that don't correspond with the way that God would have us live and to pay attention to that.

This text continues to speak to us of that world. It is a text that Jesus would reflect in his own teachings because Isaiah's message still needed to be heard when Jesus walked the earth. In fact, it still needs to be heard. The world in which Isaiah lived shares many things with our own world. Isaiah was a prophet in a time that

needed one. But he wasn't the only one. His contemporary was Micah, the same prophet whose words we echo at the end of every service – What does the LORD require of you? While both of these prophets announced this promise, this hope and vision of the days to come, they also denounced practices that were occurring right then and there. They condemned the focus of wealth and land in the hands of a few, they spoke out against the conspicuous consumption of the very wealthy, they cried out against the abuse of credit and a predatory system that was designed to take land and family farms away from individuals and place their wealth into the hands of those at the very top. And they were bitterly opposed to a military-industrial complex that threatened a world of constant war to control resources and land. The song, as they say, remains the same.

Micah and Isaiah had a conspiracy too – an effort to remind people of what God requires of them, of what gratitude and reverence require of them. They were both preaching such a similar message that they quote the same hymn in their writings. Both of these prophets announce that in the days to come the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains...that, "[God] shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks." This was a message that people needed to hear.

But this is not the promise of an instant Spring, of the mighty hand of God changing the course of a misguided river. Notice that the text doesn't imagine a future with no borders or international conflicts. It doesn't imagine an idyllic paradise. What changes is that we no longer resolve these differences with warfare. And also notice that the text doesn't say that God turns swords into plowshares or that magically spears are transformed into pruning hooks. That job is ours. We beat them from weapons of war to tools of sustenance.

This is, I think, the essence of Greg Mortenson's philosophy. We can fight if we want to, but the long term outcome of war as a delivery system for peace isn't very promising. I think that argument is as inert as the second coming. The only way that we will win that larger battle for our souls is by investing in one another – by empowering people with the ways of non-violent conflict resolution and convincing them to work harder on the world that they are in rather than living for some world to come. That is the spring that we reach for during Advent...the world that is marked by the arrival of the most unlikely of saviors...a vulnerable child in the backwoods of a occupied land. When you think of it that way, God's plan seems as audacious as building schools to change the world.

What kind of world are we dreaming of...and what are we doing to help that dream become reality? Dr. King didn't just announce his dream for the world and then sit down. He worked to help it come true. Jesus didn't just talk about the "Kingdom of God", he lived a life that forged that dream in small increments. Theirs

was a long vision – an Advent way of looking. Spring is coming...we're not exactly sure when, but we plant our bulbs now.

We cannot sit here this morning and look at our world – Korea, Afghanistan, the Us–Mexican border towns, many parts of Africa, Pakistan, Palestine, Turkey, Spain and a host of other places and think that there is a proper blanket laid out for the Prince of Peace. Yet the world in which Isaiah lived was no more decided on the matter of where God stood. Was God a god of peace or a god who merely delivered the "most righteous" to victory? I'm afraid that battle still wages in our own souls though I, for one, have no doubt on where God stands on the issue.

But here is this text announcing the coming of a world where God arbitrates our differences and we beat our swords into plowshares...or maybe these days it would be more effective to say that we turn our predator drones into water purifiers or our bombs into books. We help build a world of peace far more by feeding and educating people than by bombing them. Here are the Advent candles proclaiming the arrival of a child of God with the path to peace in the most unlikely of places and in the most counter–intuitive manner, at least for us...the path to peace illuminated by our willingness to sacrifice for it with compassion and hope. Here is the dream of spring in the midst of the dark, cold winter.

Well, there are five candles on the wreath in front of us. There are five weeks for Advent to creep up on us, so that we may all be witness together to the kind of God–driven change that comes not in mighty groundswells but in the birth of a vulnerable baby. This is why Advent matters. As that "other" world to which we belong prepares for a swell of consumerism, the annual reports on profits and the end of the year stock speculations, our calendar enters a season of hope...a season of imagining life beyond our domesticated expectations.

It is Advent that asks us to imagine a new world...Advent that calls us to pay attention...Advent that demands that we finally allow this idea that we can buy ourselves into happiness or out of trouble die, so that something new may be born. We can no longer afford to believe that might makes right, the stakes are too high. We must begin our own conspiracy within our own hearts...one that begins to work on us like that star that haunted the wise men. Something that asks of us the same surrender that the angel asked of Mary when she was presented with this outrageous plan for her child. We must reflect on what Paul says when he tells the Corinthians that "the message reflected by the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those of us who are being saved it is the power of God." The power of God. In the days to come...God will be made known to us...in the slow arrival of a spring of peace...come to us in plowshares, not swords...in pruning hooks, not spears...in a baby, not in a king.

AMEN

Benediction

May God bless you with discomfort
With no easy answers, no half-truths, no superficial relationships,
So that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger
At injustice, oppression and exploitation of people,
So that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with tears
To shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger, and war,
So that you may reach out your hand to comfort them
And turn their pain into joy.

And may God bless you with enough foolishness
To believe that you can make a difference in the world,
So that you can do what others claim cannot be done
To bring justice and kindness to all our children and the poor.

In the days to come...
Go in Peace, pray for peace and live as a witness to the Advent dream.

AMEN.