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First Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 2:1-5

A MILITARY INDUSTRIAL NIGHTMARE

It's good to be back in this pulpit. Last Sunday I had planned to ask you how your Thanksgiving went. We had 18 people over for dinner, both family and friends, and for the first time, granddaughter Iris Blue made her first major holiday appearance. As far as she can tell, Thanksgiving is a holiday on which many, many people worship her, eat copious quantities of food, and then worship her some more. So far, she is just fine with Thanksgiving.

I also baptized her on this chancel two weeks ago. The baptism of a first grandchild by her grandfather minister is a test, not for the child, but for the grandfather. Everyone wants to know how she did. She did fine. I'm the one that barely made it!

Last Sunday the text for the first Sunday in Advent was this sublime vision by the prophet Isaiah, and I still want to share with you what I had planned to say about it before I got sick. It's a tricky thing to preach about a dream, but the times call for it. It is strange to say that in the church we have just started the New Year, but it's true, and we begin the church year with the words of Isaiah for a reason. This is a dream so big that it deserves to never be forgotten. In fact, one of these days, we should even consider living it.

Right off the bat, however, we see something is strange here. Listen to the first line and see if you notice anything odd: The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. "The word that Isaiah . . . saw . . . ?" Correction (says the German compulsive in me), you don't "see" the word. You hear words. This will only give my wife Shawn new ammunition in our lifelong debate over the primary mode of revelation (I think it is acoustical, she thinks it is visual) and this text is on her side.

This text points to a new level of discernment, a vision that anticipates that the word that will come to us can be seen, we will "behold it," just as Isaiah

did. Words are not just vibrations over the ear drum; among prophets they are enacted, they produce results. In the beginning God said, ‘Let there be light . . . and there was light.’ But when you stop to think about it, why was God talking when there wasn’t anybody around to listen? And yet, there was light. That’s because in the prophetic imagination, words can actually create new realities. In that same vein Isaiah says to us, “I have seen the word that is coming, and behold – with it comes a new reality.”

Well that sounds good preacher, very biblical, just lovely. But the only reality we see around here is the same old same old — we saw people camped out for Black Friday in pursuit of the holy grail of cheap plastic crap. We see all the catalogs coming in the mail (so many beautiful people wearing beautiful clothes given to them by other beautiful people). For a month we will watch ads that promise happiness if you are among the chosen ones who wear the right pajamas and open the right small box. Of course, we doubt that any of this is true.

But to be honest with you, our commercial promises seem real by comparison to Isaiah’s dream. I hate to break it to you, but I think you are much more likely to get a kiss if you give her a diamond than anyone is to start beating swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. Not so long ago, back in the 80’s when Roman Catholic bishops were more interested in protesting the nuclear arms race than in covering up the abuse of children by priests, a group of dissident Catholics, led by the Berrigan brothers, Daniel and Phil, broke into a nuclear weapons facility at King of Prussia Pennsylvania and literally started beating on a nuclear warhead with hammers. They poured their own blood over documents. Their trial, on ten felony counts, went on for a decade. They called themselves the Plowshare Eight. They did what they did because of Isaiah 2:1–5. Instead of just reading the text in church and singing a hymn and then going to brunch – they decided to actually try their hand at beating swords into plowshares. Nuclear weapons are the biggest, scariest, most immoral swords on the face of the earth.

I don’t know what people thought they were doing. I had just graduated from seminary, and I had an idea about what they were doing. But a lot of people just thought they were crazy. They claimed to have seen a vision, and like the prophets of old they were making it real, enacting it, becoming the dissident incarnation of this beautiful idea, this vision as old and compelling as life itself — the deepest yearning of the human heart – that someday we would all worship together on a holy mountain, walk in the ways of peace, and study war no more.

And all I wanted to know at the time, and have wanted to know ever since, and still want to know this morning is when Lord, when? Could you just give me an approximate date when we will study war no more? Nothing too precise, perhaps just an approximate millennium? Because when this text was written, all they had were spears. Now we have doomsday nukes that nobody thinks much about anymore. We have biological and chemical weapons, and we don't just study war, we've made a fantastic science out of it. Our killing has become so precise, so high tech that we forget that the result is the same: we make widows and orphans, we steal the future and snuff it out, we lay waste to the fields and we mock creation itself.

When Isaiah wrote these words, which also appear in Micah, he joined in a tradition of imagining the eventual reign of God at a time when things seemed particularly hopeless. He and his band of dissident prophets imagined a time in the future when Rome would not have the last word and neither will the principalities and powers of this age. God's reign will one day be established (Isaiah knows this because apparently he has seen it), and God will dwell on Mt. Zion in the midst of God's people, and all nations will be judged and rebuked who do not walk in the light.

What that means for us — for you and me on the good ship Mayflower, is that the text to begin Advent is not for looking back, the way we do on New Year's day by singing Old Lang Syne (based on a poem by Robert Burns), and promising not to forget old acquaintances — but by look ahead to a day that you and I will never see, but by having considered and spoken aloud, we can begin to enact.

Or, if you think of the church year as a kind of drama, this is the opening act. This is act one, scene one. A curtain rises. A prophet walks onto the darkened stage in a circle of light. He begins to sing — of a mountain, and of nations streaming to it who agree to live in the covenant of peace or be judged.

And then comes another sound — the sound of hammers striking metal. They are swords being beaten into plowshares. That's how the church begins its year, with a deliberate vision of peace, followed by a deliberate act of sabotage. Weapons are converted into instruments for the production of food. Symbols of death are converted into symbols of life. And that's the word I want us to consider this morning — the word "conversion." Think about this text as a new way to understand that old and very religious sounding word, conversion.

It is so often understood only as it applies to an individual--as when a sinner converts, or a non-believer becomes a believer. People speak of converting from one religious tradition to another, sometimes when one

partner in a marriage converts to the religion of their spouse. But the church is insisting that to begin Advent, we convert in a different way. Our first act is to be an alchemist for peace. Last Sunday was the first Sunday of Advent, and on it, our act one scene one finds the Beloved Community converting the war making machinery into the tools of peace and prosperity.

Well you don't need me to tell you that this hasn't been happening, even in this reputedly Christian Nation. As a child of the Cold War, I watched the U.S. military budget become the largest single category of federal expenditures on goods and services. Every increase was to keep up with the Soviets, but now that both the Soviet Union and the Cold War are defunct, we are the world's only superpower—and yet we keep on building bigger swords.

Many of us had hoped for what is called a “peace dividend,” at the end of the Cold War, but in truth overall military spending decreased only about 10%, and then began its steady climb back to its present staggering level. And this is not like a stimulus package. As any economist will tell you, the military budget is an expenditure, not an investment. It is what economists call a “noncontributive” activity. It does not add to the present standard of living as consumer goods do.

For decades now, about 30% of the nation's leading engineers and scientists have been engaged in military research and development. The pay is higher and the research facilities are state of the art, and so they attract a disproportionate number of the best and the brightest. To put it another way, there's more money in spears than in plowshares.

To make matters worse, and much more difficult to change, a powerful and entrenched alliance between the military and industrial sectors in this country have created the country's largest sacred cow, not to mention its most corrupt and wasteful appropriation process. Not that we weren't warned. We were warned by a most unlikely voice—that of the supreme military commander of the Second World War. Not Daniel Berrigan, mind you, but Dwight D. Eisenhower , who knew a thing or two about war.

In his farewell address he issued perhaps the most unheeded warning of any American president as he was leaving office. “We have been compelled” he said, “to create a permanent armaments industry of vast proportions . . . The total influence—economic, political, even spiritual—is felt in every city, every statehouse, every office of the federal government . . . In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence . . . by the military industrial complex.”

What Eisenhower could not have imagined, however, is that the infamous “military industrial complex” would soon grow into the military–industrial–labor–science–governmental complex, until our expenditures on the machinery of war topped the combined military expenditures of all other developed nations put together.

The truth is, a militarized economy distorts and ultimately weakens any society. It was President Eisenhower that wrote, “Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed.”

Sounds more like a prophet than a president. And granted, he said these things on his way out the door. But then Isaiah said them with enemies on all sides and little hope for the peace he dreamed about because he had seen it in the imagination of his heart.

Perhaps the time has come to consider “conversion” in a whole new light, led by a hammer wielding church, to turn bombs back into bread? Perhaps the budget deficit crisis gives us a new opportunity to convert massive military spending to more productive purposes. But to do this, we would have to stop thinking about who wins and who loses between our own political parties, and start thinking about whether we are going to lose the only world we have.

The current resistance to the STAR treaty with Russia, backed by every president and leaders of both parties going back decades, reveals to us how far we have descended into insanity. It reduces nuclear warheads by 1/3 and permits us to inspect and monitor weapons that might otherwise fall into the hands of terrorists. So why oppose it, for the first time ever? – to deny the president any foreign policy victory. I’d say that we better start talking about conversion, and I don’t mean to save our souls. I mean to save the world.

It is no coincidence that the two most successful industrial economies to challenge the United States have been the same two economies prevented by World War II terms of surrender from building massive military forces—Germany and Japan. We essentially “converted” their economic systems by forbidding them to do what we have done, which is beat plowshares into swords.

We must now begin to covert ourselves, from a war–making Empire riddled with deficits to the world’s leader in plowshares. Our factories, our workers who need jobs, our whole military industrial system, (which by the way, does not operate by market principles, but is the closest thing to planned

socialism in the United States), must convert to the production of renewable energy, green technology, and products that save the garden, rather than destroying it. And since everyone is always waving the Bible around in the air instead of actually reading it, think what an advantage it will be to quote Isaiah?

We will have to do this together, not as Democrats and Republicans, not as latte liberals or Tea Party zealots—but as Americans who need conversion. It will have to be both a public and private partnership, since neither government alone, or the private sector alone, can accomplish this conversion. And what about the deficit, you say?

Consider the most successful single government program of our lifetime, the GI Bill of Rights. It's how my parents bought a home and furthered their education. That program, which nobody thought of as socialism, was an investment with an enormous rate of return. The extra federal taxes collected out of the higher incomes earned by returning soldiers, because of the extra training and reintegration into a new kind of work force—amounted to 30 times the program's cost. The government got back 30 dollars for every dollar it spent on the GI bill. We need a new GI bill for all workers in the military sector of our economy who wish to be retrained to beat swords into plowshares.

Or we can just sing about it, pray about it, have some cookies and go home. This year, we will spend a million dollars for every soldier serving in Afghanistan. For that amount of money, says Greg Mortenson, author of "The Cups of Tea" we could build 30 schools to educate girls—and nothing has a rate of return like educating girls.

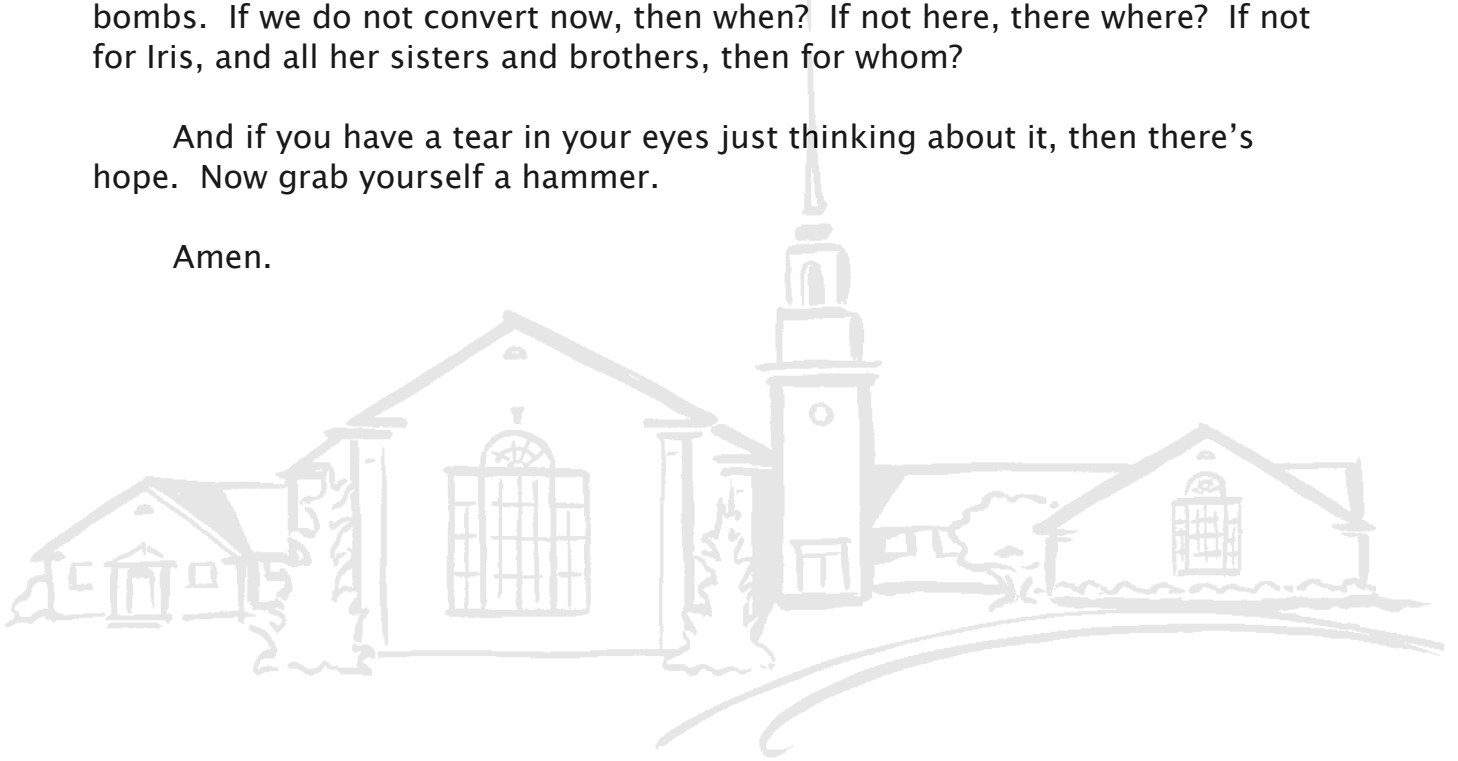
I'm teaching a course this semester at OCU called Moral Issues: Peace and Non-Violence. We study peace the way the world has long studied war, wondering what it would take to study it no more. I showed the class an interview the other day between Bill Moyers and Greg Mortenson, the builder of schools in Afghanistan, whose father was a Presbyterian minister and who gave his son Greg, at age nine, Schweitzer's remarkable tract entitled, "Ehrfurcht vor dem leben." Most people translate this, "Reverence for Life," but the German words more closely translate, "to be in awe of the mystery of life." The idea came to Schweitzer as he traveled by boat in equatorial Africa, searching he said, for a universal ethic to end violence.

At the end of the interview, in the darkened classroom, I noticed that some of my students had tears in their eyes. And although I wasn't in church, I can tell you that what occurred there was a conversion—a small, but powerful recognition that our present ways are unsustainable. I trust that they will go out and convert others, and by this faith I live.

Isaiah's dream is not without consequences of course — and it will be resisted. If we take it seriously, it would be a nightmare for the military industrial complex. To end a nightmare, of course, all you have to do is wake up, rub the blood stains from your eyes, and start building windmills instead of bombs. If we do not convert now, then when? If not here, there where? If not for Iris, and all her sisters and brothers, then for whom?

And if you have a tear in your eyes just thinking about it, then there's hope. Now grab yourself a hammer.

Amen.



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