

“Imagine Peace”
November 27, 2022
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Isaiah 2:1-5 (NRSV)

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

² In days to come
the mountain of the LORD's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.

³ Many peoples shall come and say,
“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob,
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.”

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

⁴ He shall judge between the nations
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
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.

⁵ O house of Jacob,
come, let us walk
in the light of the LORD!

It's the holiday season, a time of anticipation, expectations of wonder and joy, a time for dreaming. What do you dream about? A white Christmas? To face unafraid the plans that we've made? Sugar plums? (As if most of us have even *seen* a sugared plum, let alone tasted one).

In today's scripture lesson, Isaiah invites us to a dream. Not our dream – God's dream. It's a dream God shared with Isaiah to inspire the people of his time, a dream that still inspires us today. It's not the sort of dream you have after eating too much pumpkin pie right before you go to bed, like the kind where you can fly or a giraffe lives in your back yard. This is the kind

of waking dream that casts a vision for the future, imagining possibilities you hope will come to be. Whatever you dream about, I guarantee that God's dream is bigger. In our experience, big dreams don't often come to fruition. So we only dare to envision modest change – that people will argue less, that the economy will improve, that we'll have a joyful holiday season without another surge in COVID or RSV or the flu. But God? God's vision is far greater than ours.

Verse one of the text for today reads: *The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.* Not the word Isaiah *heard* or the word Isaiah *read*. The word Isaiah *saw*. Isaiah is inviting us to enter the world of imagination. What was the word Isaiah saw?

The mountain where God dwells will be the highest of the mountains. All the nations will stream to it. They'll say, "Let's go to the mountain of the LORD." Who is this dream about? All people will stream to God's mountain, hungry to learn God's way. Not just those who are chosen. Not just those who share a common language and heritage. Not just the strong and the powerful nor the weak and the lowly. *All nations.*

Why will they come? *So God can teach us the way to live and the paths to follow.* Imagine – a world where all people, everywhere, set aside their agendas, their ambitions, their certainties, and seek out what God wants – not just for them, but for everyone. Can you see it?

God will judge between the nations and arbitrate for many people. They won't just come for a pep talk or to get good advice. God will adjudicate their disputes – nation against nation, neighbor against neighbor. No longer will justice be determined by who can formulate the most eloquent argument, or who has the most sway with the system, or who has the deeper pockets or possesses the most powerful arsenal. They will receive *God's justice*. God's justice is not like

our justice. What's just in God's eyes is for things to be as God intended them to be from the very beginning, not preserving the status quo or getting what we deserve or exacting revenge.

What will be the result of this holy court? *They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.* Nations and people will always be in conflict as long as their authority is derived from heads of state and those with earthly power. But in God's vision, we will follow God's ways. There will be no more need for fighting. *Nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war anymore.* Can you see it?

Imagine what would happen if we all stopped filling the air with the noise of our own arguments and listened more closely for God's voice. That's not to say that hearing God and following is simple – listening for God's voice requires that we interpret what we hear. Humans have a mixed record when it comes to interpretation. Religious disagreements often lead to some of the most devastating conflicts. But I'm not sure we can pin that on God. When your understanding of God is predicated on being right more than being gracious and merciful, that doesn't come from God. The Word became flesh to point the way. Jesus said and did a great many things, but he said it all comes down to this: love God and love your neighbor. If we stopped appointing ourselves as judge and jury and left the judgment to God, how much more peaceful would the world be?

Of course, we know Isaiah was speaking in hyperbole. We're not so naïve to think that the vision Isaiah offers is actually possible. He must have been describing what would happen in the final judgment at the end of time. *Not so fast.* The word Isaiah saw was that these things would happen "in days to come." There is nothing in that phrase in English or in Hebrew that suggests an eschatological vision, that what Isaiah described was the heavenly realm.

But still, God doesn't *really* expect that everyone will seek God's way and that wars will end, right? It's obviously a metaphor. We're meant to understand this to mean that there are better days ahead, that some wars will end even while others begin, and that in the meantime we should just keep doing good things, right? Surely, God doesn't actually expect world peace.

God's vision is always greater than ours. And God has a way of making the impossible possible. Thousands of Hebrew slaves laden with gifts from their oppressors, simply walking out of Egypt. Battles won against absurd odds, led by priests carrying a box and a prophet holding up his arms. A baby born to an unwed, migrant couple who turned out to be Emmanuel, God with us. A Messiah crucified and buried, rising again three days later with redemption in his hands and a commission for his followers. A misfit band of fishermen, freedom fighters, and tax collectors working together to launch a global movement that changed the course of history. Isn't it just like God to have a dream so outrageous no one would believe it's possible?

Isaiah invites us to the realm of the imagination. So let's go along. What would it be like to live in that world? If conflict wasn't the primary driver of human ambition, what might be possible? If we all loved God with every part of ourselves and loved our neighbors as much as we loved ourselves, there would be no need for war. And if the resources devoted to war were redirected to preserving life, health, and human flourishing, what other parts of God's dream could seem not so impossible?

The defense budget in this country is \$1.64 trillion, 14.3% of the federal budget.¹ For comparison, education spending is \$637 billion, 5.6% of the budget,² and children and family

¹ <https://www.usaspending.gov/agency/department-of-defense?fy=2022>

² <https://www.usaspending.gov/agency/department-of-education?fy=2022>

services is \$13.7 billion, 1.2% of the budget.³ There are currently 32 active wars being fought in places around the world, according to the Council on Foreign Relations,⁴ including Russia's unjustified war against Ukraine, now targeting infrastructure in an effort to freeze civilians as a brutal winter approaches.

But conflict isn't limited to statecraft and war. As of this morning, there have been 614 mass shootings in the United States this year.⁵ Our children now regularly practice active shooter drills in their schools, causing increased depression, anxiety, and ongoing psychological trauma.⁶ We continue to do violence to our environment through ever increasing carbon emissions,⁷ which disproportionately affect the most vulnerable and disadvantaged around the world.⁸ In the second quarter of this year, with the environmental crisis deepening and fuel prices skyrocketing, the top five oil companies alone raked in a record \$62.2 million in profit.⁹

Our problem isn't that we don't have the resources to address the biggest things God wants us to tackle. Our problem is that we spend too many of those resources destroying life instead of building it up. Perhaps the core of the issue is not that we dream too big, but that we dream too small. Achieving peace, ending poverty and hunger, stamping out killer diseases worldwide is too much for us to imagine, too big for us to find possible. So instead, we narrow our vision to carving out our own happiness, amassing as much wealth as we can, and protecting it at all costs. We become either sentimental or cynical about big projects, because

³ https://www.usaspending.gov/explorer/budget_function

⁴ <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker>

⁵ <https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/reports/mass-shooting>

⁶ <https://everytownresearch.org/report/the-impact-of-active-shooter-drills-in-schools/>

⁷ <https://ourworldindata.org/co2-emissions>

⁸ <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/climate-change-and-health>

⁹ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-10-25/big-oil-s-profits-just-keep-rolling-in-as-world-economy-sputters?leadSource=uverify%20wall>

deep down we don't really believe health and wholeness are possible on a global scale. We may have given up on that dream, but I assure you that God has not. It may take a divine vision to break us out of our limited imagination and our destructive pattern of living. And that's exactly what Isaiah offers, for those with the eyes of faith to see it.

Isaiah cannot be accused of being too practical. The prophecies bearing his name foretell judgment and doom, but also some of the most hopeful words in all of scripture, visions of peace and wholeness on a cosmic scale. Did he believe it could happen? Isaiah's world was very different than ours. He wasn't dealing with Russia or gun rights or the energy lobby. No, Isaiah and his people were facing the Assyrian army, literally at the gates of Jerusalem. It was an enemy already bent on conquest but further enraged by the ill-advised and ill-fated alliances Judah had made with their already-defeated neighbors. The Judeans waited hopelessly, slowly being starved out ahead of the inevitable – utter defeat, the destruction of the temple, and being driven into exile. Not sure I'd want to trade our problems for theirs.

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the mountain of the LORD's house
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they shall beat their swords into plowshares
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neither shall they learn war anymore.*

Though their way of life was about to be destroyed, there were better days ahead for God's people. One day they would return from exile to rebuild Jerusalem, though it would never again be what it was. Their story would not end there, but would continue on and be told in synagogues and churches like ours even today, challenging hearts and minds and inspiring hope in people they couldn't even imagine.

Do we dare to hope for the impossible? Can we find the strength to keep on going, to pursue a vision that may take years or decades or more than our lifetimes to achieve? And can we be resilient enough to endure the heartbreak we will surely experience along the way?

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw. Can you see it? In days to come... How? When? We do not know; we cannot say. But this we know: God has a vision, a vision that is greater than anything we can hope or imagine. This is God's work in the world, a work God is already about, And Isaiah assures us that God's word does not return empty.

Isaiah's dream invites us to imagine God's hope for us on a global scale, but it also invites us to see it and practice it in *our* lives. How are we creating peace in our homes, our places of employment or learning, our neighborhoods, our relationships? In what acts of justice or injustice do we participate, consciously or otherwise? Is our vision limited to restoring what we once knew, or can we imagine greater possibilities for ourselves and those around us? In this season of Advent, can we dare to imagine peace – true and lasting peace – in the way we live and the interactions we share? This is a time of wonder and imagination. Let's dream big.

The word Isaiah saw is a vision we are invited to share, to hope against hope, to see beyond seeing, to believe in what seems impossible to us now. This is God's dream, and we're invited to dream along with God. God makes the impossible possible. Can you see it? The invitation of Isaiah is our invitation today: *Come, let us walk in the light of the LORD. Amen.*