



“Isaiah’s Peace: Seeing the Word”

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Isaiah 2:1-5

Ralph Bunche Park is a small municipal public park in the Turtle Bay neighborhood of New York City, on First Avenue between 42nd and 43rd Streets and across the street from the United Nations headquarters. The park was named for Ralph Bunche, the first African-American to win the Nobel Peace Prize. In the park’s northwest corner is a granite staircase inscribed with the famous quotation from Isaiah 2:4, “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 anymore.” Ralph Bunche Park was New York City’s first peace park and has been a place of public assembly and dissent. It has been the site of countless demonstrations and protests against political oppression. It embodies, in many ways, the principles of human understanding, freedom of expression, and hope for a future peace.

Our theme for Advent this year is “Peace Will Come,” and over the next four Sundays we will focus on the words of peace pronounced by the prophet Isaiah. Catholic theologian Gerald O’Collins has called the writings of Isaiah, “the fifth gospel.” By this he means that so many of the themes of the gospels, enfolded in their portrayal of Jesus, have their scriptural beginnings in Isaiah. Isaiah’s connection to the story of Jesus seems particularly strong in Advent and Christmas. Even the prophet’s name, Isaiah, means “Yahweh saves” and draws our attention to the Christmas story. But before we can unwrap these prophecies of peace, we first need to get to know a bit more about Isaiah and his writings.

The book of Isaiah is one of the longest in the Hebrew Scriptures and the writings within it were composed over a period of many, many years. In fact, the length of time the writings were believed to be written make scholars believe there were at least three “Isaias.” That is, there were other prophets who lived long after the original Isaiah who attached themselves to his name and style of writing because of his notoriety and effectiveness at conveying God’s message of peace.

Isaiah’s prophecies were also important during the time of Jesus, nearly eight hundred years later, as his words continued to be read prominently in the synagogues and in the Temple. Jesus probably heard more about Isaiah’s peace than about anything else in the Hebrew Scriptures. In the gospel of Luke, Jesus began his ministry by reading a passage from the prophet Isaiah and applying the message to his own ministry. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Isaiah's writings can be distinguished from other Hebrew Scriptures based strongly on their extraordinary literary quality. Isaiah was a poet who used vivid and powerful images and symbols to convey his message of peace. He managed to preach even uncomfortable words in a style possible for all people to understand and to live out in the world. Isaiah's writings of peace and justice have become, in our time, prominent fixtures in our liturgies of Advent and Christmas.

I see four reasons why Isaiah's words are important to us as we enter Advent. First, he was a prophet of hope and new beginnings. In particular, he spoke of the birth of a new king who would be a "Wonderful Counselor" and a "Prince of Peace." Although Isaiah's prophetic eye was probably foreseeing the birth of Hezekiah, who did turn out to be one of the better kings of Judah, Christians have latched onto Isaiah's words as foretelling of a peace that could only come through the birth of Jesus. Second, Isaiah was a prophet revealing the compassion of God. Isaiah's God was a God of mercy and comfort much like the Abba, Father of whom Jesus spoke. Third, Isaiah was the first to articulate that the God of the Jews was also the God of all people. God's mercy was to reach beyond the boundaries of Jerusalem and Judah and extend to all peoples, in every corner of the earth. Jesus, who brought the gospel to Jews and Gentiles alike, deliberately and passionately exercised his ministry in the spirit of an inclusive Isaiah. And fourth, Isaiah was a prophet of peace and justice. Harmony among all peoples and compassion for the poor were the hallmarks of God's presence. Jesus ministered out of a long prophetic tradition that truly began with Isaiah's peace.

But Isaiah certainly wasn't an idealist. He knew that the world was filled with war and violence and pain. Isaiah lived in a time when the people of God were divided into two kingdoms and violent allegiances were being formed between all the nations of the earth. War was the word of the day and the people needed hope. The people needed a prophetic word from God.

So, in our Scripture reading this morning, Isaiah received a word. Isaiah's vision of weapons of war turned into agricultural tools and images of death-dealing turned into food-producing, was a promise for "the days to come." People of every nation would stream to Mt. Zion, including those who were enemies of Israel and Judah. God's instruction would go forth from Jerusalem. God would judge between the nations based on their actions of peace and justice. Those who looked upon God's mountain would be transformed by God's teaching. Isaiah beckoned God's people to look towards a future filled with peace, and just like the people of Isaiah's time, we too need a good word to break into our chaotic world where bad words and horrible acts seem to prevail. We, as Advent people, need Isaiah's peace now more than ever. Can you see the word?

I don't know about you, but I'm accustomed to hearing a word from God, not seeing a word from God. In dramatic fashion, the prophet Isaiah speaks of "seeing the word." The text says, "The word that Isaiah, son of Amoz, saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem." Isaiah saw the word. By seeing the word, Isaiah was asked to perceive a new, peace-filled world – a world where the city of God, the purposes and power of a God of justice were high on the mountain and at the center of all people. When God gives us a word and teaches us, we are not only to listen to the word, but we are to "behold the word." God's words are to dwell in our lives and be enacted in our lives. When God said, "Let there be light," there was light! Light became real. Words became real. And Isaiah wanted peace to be a reality for all creation. Can you see the word?

Yet, the world in the first chapter of Isaiah was not a place of peace. In chapter one, Isaiah graphically laid out what he had seen – the violence, bribery, unfaithfulness, desolation, and the trampling of the poor. There were brief interruptions as God called for repentance and offered glimpses of hope. But the whispers of peace were drowned out by the shouts of war and rebellion. And then chapter two opened as though Isaiah was starting all over again. God was envisioning a new and different reign, a new and different world. Can you see the word?

Isaiah's word was that the mountain of the Lord's house would be established as the highest of the mountains and would be raised above the hills; all the nations would stream to it. Jews and Gentiles, every race and every face, every tongue and every type would stream to God's holy mountain. All the peoples will come and say, this is the place where God will teach God's ways. Can you see the word?

And today, God wants to teach us how to walk the path of peace! Although we live in the midst of war and although we live in the midst of confusion, we too crave instruction from God. We too crave a word from the Lord as we enter this season of anticipation and season of peace. But we are bombarded by health issues, trust issues, power issues, pain issues, ignorance issues. We are bombarded by wars and rumors of wars. We don't want nation to lift sword against nation. We don't want to learn war any more. The gospel of Isaiah, the good news of Isaiah, is telling us that we must behold the word of peace. Peace is on its way if we set our sights on God and on the teachings of God. Can you see the word?

Can you see in God's realm that the implements of conflict are transformed into tools of community? Isaiah reminds us that God's desire for peace beckons us to hear the clanking of metal on metal, to hear the hammer beating away our weapons of war. "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 anymore." Nations will trade in their swords, and their war, and their bombs, and their tanks, and their guns for a new focus, a focus like the Ralph Bunche Park where there is a hope – a hope that through the cooperation of nations, the tools of community can replace the weapons of war. Can you see the word?

Can you see it? Can you see Isaiah's words carved into the wall across from the United Nations building? Can you see across the street in the General Assembly as they debate the rise of violence and distrust and fear in our world? Can you see their struggle to provide resources for starving refugees escaping war and death? Can you see as they seek to end all forms of modern slavery? Can you see their ongoing attention to fighting AIDS and other serious diseases? Can you see the word?

And it is that realm of peace, the peace of Isaiah, that we strive to see today as we enter Advent. In Advent, we lift our sight beyond the challenges, the crises, and the warring words in order to participate with all generations and all peoples in a hope for a world transformed. And although there are wars and rumors of wars, we must keep our focus on the teachings of God, the love of God, the justice of God if we are to join in God's work of peacemaking. And because we have our eyes on the mountain of the Lord, on the reign and realm of God, and because we are

focused on God's instruction and directions for peace, we may actually see the word of God in action. We may actually become, you and I, the words of God in action.

And that is what it means for us to journey into Advent, to walk into the light. We will see the Word. The Word will become flesh and dwell among us. The Word will be born under the light of a star. God's gift of peace will become real to us and will live and walk with us in our world of war. And although the Prince of Peace will suffer the pain of political persecution and the stinging stripes of conflict, we will hear the distant echoes of the clanking swords and the clinking spears as they are beaten into tools of light.

As Isaiah proclaimed, we are called to walk into the light of peace and we called to be a light unto the nations. God's light gives us hope. Living into Advent means walking into the light of the Lord. And we, as Advent people, must be like these candles that we will light every week, like these tiny lights, transforming weapons of conflict into the tools of community. God's light will not be denied. The peace of God will come this Advent. Can you see the word?

Amen.