

Swords into Plowshares

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[0 : 00] As you know, it's the first Sunday of Advent, which is a wonderful time for this church.

It's a wonderful time for many things. If you have had a rough 2016, you can give an early goodbye to 2016 if you want. This is the first day of the new year in the way the church recognizes the year as we start to look forward again through the events of Jesus' life.

2016 has been a bit of an unusual year politically, internationally, culturally. You may be happy to wave it goodbye, and now is your opportunity. Advent, in fact, is a time to look forward, to begin to look forward and to have hope.

And that's why we'll be doing a sermon series through a few passages in Isaiah. Certain hope for uncertain times. Certain hope for uncertain times.

What can be our hope? After a year like this, after hearing people banter about politics for so long, what kind of a message of hope can possibly speak to our hearts right now?

[1 : 14] If you hear words like, This is going to be better. Or, I can make our country amazing. Or, you can be anything that you want to be.

At this point, you expect to hear after that, Paid for by so-and-so for president. Or, if it's a commercial break of some other sort, maybe just do the do.

But, that kind of hope, by this point, is relatively lost on us, isn't it? Because there are certain limits that we have, and we feel it time and again as these kinds of hopes foul us.

We know that as you hit certain stages in life, certain things are going to happen. Between age 30 and 40, your body will slow down. You may need to retire from professional football or basketball or what have you.

When you hit 70, thereabouts, you may need to retire from your job. Eventually, your body itself will fail you. These parts of the arc of our lives are just going to happen.

[2 : 20] And that's okay. You know, that's okay. We can look forward to these other parts of our lives. We look across this broad arc of our life. We see things that are more or less most likely going to happen at a certain time.

Certainly going to happen eventually. We can plan our lives. It affects us in certain ways. We save for retirement. We plan a certain, we have a certain character of living now, knowing what will happen in some ways in the future.

And as we talk about hope, that's the kind of, that's the kind of arc of life that we're looking across. Hope in Jesus Christ looks forward to a certain future.

A certain future that God will do very specific things in. But that affects us in certain ways now. And so we're going to look across that arc of hope in this sermon series.

And in particular, tonight, we'll be thinking about the hope of peace. Hoping for peace in our hearts, in our lives, in our communities.

[3 : 24] I know that's important to you. It's important to me as well. Let's pray about it for a moment. Lord God, we need peace.

We are anxious. We are at war with one another. We have conflict. And we need you to solve it. We need hope that there will be peace. We need hope of peace now. We pray that you will speak that to us tonight. Amen. So the passage that we're working with tonight is in Isaiah 2.

If you have a Bible there, I believe the words may be on the screen as well. Just three verses that we're really working with. I'm just going to go through them again here to bring them back to the forefront of your mind.

This is a vision of hope. It's something that seems in the future, but it's meant, as we look forward across the arc of life, to affect us right now.

[4 : 26] And here's what it looks like. It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord, this is a great metaphor for God being high above everything, for recognizing God's authority, for recognizing him as creator, for recognizing him as the source of all things.

And this shall be established as the highest of the mountains, shall be lifted above the hills, and all the nations shall flow to it, flow up this mountain, and many people shall come and say, let us go to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his way, this is why they flow to the mountain, that he may teach us his ways, and that we may walk in his paths. For out of Zion shall go the law, as the nations flowed to the mountain of the Lord, and out flows God's law, the word of the Lord, his ways from Jerusalem, and he shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples.

And here's these beautiful words, which I'm sure you've heard at some point. They shall beat their swords to plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.

Isn't that beautiful? You've heard it sometime, I'm sure, because it's so beautiful that when this verse was originally translated this way 400 years ago in the King James Bible, they stopped changing it after that point.

[6 : 03] Many other things have changed in the translation of the Bible, but this verse is basically the same as it was 400 years ago, because of the beauty of that passage. Swords to plowshares.

If you're not sure exactly what a plowshare is, maybe, like myself, you think it has something to do with plowing. That's correct. A plowshare is sort of the plowy part of a plow that goes in the ground. A pruning hook hooks onto things to prune them, apparently. It's basically a knife for a vine. So again, it's an agricultural imagery. It cuts a vine.

And it's powerful because for thousands of years, people knew exactly what the opposite of this was. Because year after year, as countries went to war, as nations, as kings, as just towns or clans went to war with each other, this is exactly the opposite of what they did.

They took their plowshares. They took their pruning hooks. They took their hammers and sickles. They melted them down. They beat them. And they forged them into weapons of death.

[7 : 14] They took these tools of life and forged them into weapons of death. Swords and spears don't do quite as much good in modern warfare.

But we are able to reallocate funds in a pretty similar way to build destructive machines that take away life when money could be used to give life.

It's a powerful imagery, isn't it? It's something that we do individually on our own also. This isn't just governments that do this kind of thing.

We take our assets and our talents and we convert them. We melt them down and we forge them into weapons of domination and self-protection, into tools for war.

Maybe you have a law degree. Have you used that as a license to tear people down with criticism? You have some kind of a know-how, something specific that you can do really well.

[8 : 25] Have you used that for you're doing it wrong? Have you been the beneficiary of a beautiful conservative worldview of rights and property and wealth for many people?

Have you received this wonderful progressive vision of turning around injustices that have been in place for hundreds of years?

Have you taken those things, those great tools and assets, and used them to silence conversation, to unfollow people on Facebook, to cast blame about who messed things up, whose fault it is, to separate people into the sheep and the goats?

Have you used your tools of life for war? However, I know that I have. I know that most of us have. If you're really honest, if you don't know that you have done this, we all do it unintentionally. If you're married, ask your spouse. If you're not married, ask a close friend, a workout partner, a co-worker.

[9 : 36] Sometimes work up the courage and ask an honest question. How do I come across to you? Is there something that you have wanted to say to me that you have left unsaid, you've been scared to say?

You may be surprised about what tools of life you have turned into weapons of war. And it's something that we've all done. There's this great short story by Jonathan Swift, the writer from the 1700s.

He wrote that pamphlet, Modest Proposal. He has a little short story called The Battle of the Books. And there was a debate at that time about, like, you know, what's more important? The Greeks and

the Romans, the ancient books, the old ones, or the new ones, or new modern philosophers and thinkers?

And so he wrote this short story in which there's a library and two stacks of books. And the books literally, like, get off the shelves and start a war with one another and tear out pages and deface each other and chain each other to the bookshelves.

It's, like, you know, bizarre satire. It's funny. But it's, like, exactly what Washington, D.C. feels like. Like books going to war with one another, doesn't it?

[10:53] People getting advanced degrees in order to tear one another down. That's what it feels like to me. And yet, in the midst of all of this, in the midst of all that we do, that we fall into again and again, here is this vision that verse 4 ends on.

Neither shall they learn war anymore. Neither shall they learn war anymore. How can we get to that point?

We're going to take just a few minutes to try to follow what God has given us in this passage to see how we can get to that point. Neither, we have a hope that neither shall they learn war anymore. In order to do so, I just want to bring your attention to an image that occurs here. It's actually a fairly recurrent image in God's word to us.

It's something you may not have picked up on before. It's an image of a mountain and a river.

There's this image of, like, a metaphor of, like, a mountain that represents God's presence, like we were saying, and God's authority being recognized, like a temple on top.

[12:00] God's presence is there, recognizing that. And then there's this river that comes down from it. And the river represents life and God's mission to the whole world.

The river spreads out to the whole world. This happens actually again and again in Scripture. The first time is at the very beginning in Genesis. There's this Garden of Eden in the middle of the earth, and a river flows from it.

The garden is like God's temple because God's presence is there. And this river flows out of it, so it must be on high ground. Flow goes from high to low, right? So the river flows out of it, and it splits into four rivers and waters the entire earth.

And it's sort of a physical picture of God's own charge to humans to go out from the garden, to fill the earth, and to spread God's will, and to spread God's ways through the whole earth.

That's what God wanted us to do. And this river was kind of a symbol of that, and life going to the entire earth from God's authority. It comes up again sort of in the middle of the Bible, the book of Ezekiel, and the prophet has this vision.

[13:15] Again, it's a vision of hope going forward. There's a temple on a great mountain, and a river comes out of the temple. So God's authority on a great mountain, a river comes out. And this fresh water river, as it comes down and hits the dead sea, highly salty sea, it makes the sea into fresh water.

It's beautiful, isn't it? And it says this beautiful line, So where the river flows, everything will live. This isn't just about God's mission anymore. This is about God's healing.

Trees along the side of the river, they come up with fruit. Not only do they come up once with fruit, but every month there's a new crop of fruit in the trees. God bring his life to bring healing to us.

One more time, at the very end of the Bible, in the book of Revelation, same thing. There is a city on a mountain, and God's throne is there. It's his presence, his authority.

And from there, a river flows, the water of life. Again, there's the trees with fruit that comes every month. And there's this tree of life there, whose leaves are said to be for the healing of the nations.

[14:28] It's beautiful. And again, we have it here. In Isaiah 2, verse 2. It shall come to pass in those latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains.

His authority shall be lifted above the hills. Only here's the reverse. Instead of a river flowing out, here's a river flowing up the mountain. And the nations shall flow to it.

The nations who have been at war, the nations who have been in combat to fight and to destroy and to turn their plowshares into swords, need to come back up the mountain to be restored by God.

And finally, at the end of verse 3 here, Out of Zion shall go the law. This is the sort of unmetaphored image of what's going on.

The river always represented this. Out of Zion shall go the law and the word of the Lord. The ways of God coming out of there. And only then will the nations, will the whole world have peace.

[15 : 36] It's an amazing set of images. It's a lot, isn't it? So what are we going to do with that? What are we going to do with that vision of hope? Of recognizing God's authority and life coming from that. For the whole world, which brings peace to everybody.

An end of conflict. What are we going to do with that vision of hope? I think that there's only one thing that we can do with it this Advent season. With this great image in mind, let me read to you these words from Jesus.

Jesus said, I am the bread of life. He who comes to me shall not hunger. Jesus said, I am the light of the world.

He who follows me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life. I am the resurrection and the life. I am the way, the truth, and the life.

Jesus is the life. Jesus is the river. Jesus is what this river was representing in this metaphor all along. Life being given to the whole world. Jesus is life from God because Jesus is from God.

[16 : 46] That's what Jesus was talking about when he said, Whoever drinks of the water that I give him will never be thirsty again. The water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

This is what Jesus Christ has come to do. To be a river of new life. To pour forth across the earth. To end conflict. To give new life.

To draw the nations to himself. Have you been forging weapons of war in your life? Have you been turning your tools of life into weapons of death?

Jesus has come to turn swords to plowshares. Jesus has come to turn your swords to plowshares. Are you exhausted? Jesus has come to give a new, refreshing, fresh water to you.

Do you feel like a dead sea? Do you feel like you're stagnant and nothing's moving and nothing's happening in your life?

[17 : 54] Jesus is fresh water to make you fresh again. Do you feel lost and searching? Jesus shows you the way to the high mountain that will direct your paths.

Have you tasted, have you tasted God's goodness before? But it has been so long. It has been so long since you've tasted that goodness.

Jesus is able to produce new fruit again and again every month for us. For us to taste the goodness of God and spread that productivity throughout our lives.

Are you lost in a sea of combat among your co-workers and among your family that simply will not end? Jesus has come to bring peace to the world and to your life.

If Jesus has come to bring that peace then, how then shall we be seekers of peace ourselves? Jesus has come for us to have peace.

[18 : 58] How can we be seekers of peace in Christ? We're going to conclude with just a few short answers to that question.

How do we seek peace in Jesus? One, here's the first one. Seeking peace is new life from Jesus as we are molded by God's ways.

Seeking peace is new life in Jesus as we are molded by God's ways. That was the vision as the nations flow to Jesus, flow to God up the mountain.

That he may teach us his ways, that we may walk in his paths. That's the whole point. That we will be molded by God's ways. There are many ways for us to do this. To simply read scripture on our own.

Not only to read it, but ask ourselves questions every time that we read it. To ask, how does this impact me now? What might God be speaking to me now?

[20 : 04] What part of my life is affected by this now? We should ask our friends, how might God be changing my life now? In what way am I being formed now?

We should be asking our pastors and our small group leaders, what might God be doing in my life now? This is how we learn God's ways within us.

How else do we seek peace in Christ? Two, seeking peace is drawing others to the mountain of the Lord.

Seeking peace is drawing others to the mountain of the Lord. This was the whole vision, wasn't it? The nations come flowing like a river up the mountain.

Because the nations, the peoples, all of those around us need peace. They know it. We know it. We all need peace. And if we are going to be seekers of peace, we need to draw others to the mountain of the Lord.

[21 : 05] Because they need life and healing. They need to learn God's ways. This can be embarrassing sometimes. Let me just encourage you.

Let me encourage you that there are many opportunities to do so. I was at the doctor just the other day. And the nurse who was seeing me.

And she's trying to distract me as she's sticking various things in the back of my throat. And she asked me what my interests are. She asked me, are you religious? I'm like, yeah.

And she asked, oh, so what religion? Christianity. Christianity. And she keeps on asking me as she's looking around in my face. And what kind of, you know, was it Catholic or something?

I'm like, oh, Anglican. What's that? And so, you know, I'm trying to explain while she sticks something in the back of my throat. And I'm half gagging. And so I'm like, all right, you know, I've got something.

[22 : 01] Let's just push on this and see where it goes. I was helping preach at this church recently. And she's like, oh, that's interesting. And then she sticks a swab so far up my nose that she's got a culture of my prefrontal cortex.

And then basically just walks out of the room. And, you know, nothing happened of that conversation. But when that happened, it made me think just like, man, it's so easy to work up these conversations, you know, to try to gather up all this courage.

But you know what? Most people, for most people, it is actually entirely comfortable to say a few words about religion and God and move on. It's not that big of a deal for most people.

Sometimes someone just walks out of the room. Sometimes it goes somewhere and you have an opportunity to be an emissary of peace. Thank you for entertaining that disgusting story.

But it was an encouragement to me. Third point, how do we seek peace in Christ? And this is a difficult one. This is complicated. We have this great vision of peace, of what will be.

[23 : 08] As we look across the arc of our lives, the arc of history, and this impacts us in so many ways right now, peace is a major concern for us because it's part of our entire lives.

It's what this vision is, peace. We have this vision. So does this mean, like, we can never, like, argue with someone? Does this mean, like, we can't confront someone?

Does this mean, you know, we have to be a pacifist because of this? And I think the answer is this. Sometimes the Bible, especially in the Sermon on the Mount, makes strong statements in order to draw us to peace.

But sometimes it recognizes the complexity. And so I think the answer is this. For us now, peace is not an expectation, but it is a way of life.

Peace is not always for us now an expectation of what will happen, but it is a way of life for us. There's this great verse in the book of Romans.

[24 : 10] It's an exhortation to peace, but it totally recognizes the difficulty we have in actually pursuing peace. It says, Like those qualifiers.

If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live in peace. This is the whole way that you should walk. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you.

There is only so much you can do with the results. But there is so much that you can do in the way that you walk your life out.

There are many things that you can do. You can seek peace by seeking new life in Jesus, day in and day out, to be molded by God's ways.

You can seek peace by drawing others to the mountain of the Lord. It is complicated, but it is a way of life. In conclusion here, our world needs peace.

[25 : 15] Our country needs peace. Our souls need peace. Our families need peace. We all probably recognized that this past Thursday. We have a wonderful hope of peace because of Jesus Christ that informs us, even now, that this great consummation vision of peace, swords to plowshares, affects us even now.

It's a way of living even now. So let's take this. Let's take this as an asset and as a tool of life, peace and hope. Let's not forge it into just another bludgeon.

It's easy to take things in the Bible and Christianity and to forge them into bludgeons against people as positions. Let's keep it as a tool of peace and hope.

Let's keep it as a tool of life, peace and hope, and use it to bear with people, just as Christ has borne with us in our difficulties, with a humble and an open hand. As the poet Robert Frost has said, to be social is to be forgiving.
So let us forgive and live in peace. Amen.