**GREENLAND HILLS UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**

**November 27, 2016**

**SCRIPTURE** Isaiah 2:1-5 - Common English Bible (CEB)

1 This is what Isaiah, Amoz’s son, saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

2 In the days to come

 the mountain of the Lord’s house

 will be the highest of the mountains.

 It will be lifted above the hills;

 peoples will stream to it.

3 Many nations will go and say,

“Come, let’s go up to the Lord’s mountain,

 to the house of Jacob’s God

 so that he may teach us his ways

 and we may walk in God’s paths.”

Instruction will come from Zion;

 the Lord’s word from Jerusalem.

4 God will judge between the nations,

 and settle disputes of mighty nations.

Then they will beat their swords into iron plows

 and their spears into pruning tools.

Nation will not take up sword against nation;

 they will no longer learn how to make war.

5 Come, house of Jacob,

 let’s walk by the Lord’s light.

**SERMON** *Peace in Our Land* Roy Atwood

The Scripture reading today, on this first Sunday of Advent, comes from the book of Isaiah. Now, Isaiah is one of the primary prophets in the Old Testament. I don’t know about you, but before I entered seminary, I had a real misunderstanding of what it meant to be a prophet in the Old Testament. I pictured them as this magical mouthpiece of God, where God would whisper prophecies in their ear and they’d repeat it. I’m picturing something like the scene in Dumbo where the mouse is trying to convince the ringmaster to include Dumbo in the circus act, so he keeps whispering “Dumbo, Dumbo, Dumbo” into the ringmaster’s ear as he’s sleeping, and then the ringmaster wakes up and shouts, “Dumbo!” like it was his own idea.

Or for a reference more recent than the 1940s, I also think of the movie *Inception*, where Leonardo DiCaprio goes into people’s dreams to convince them of things without them knowing it. That’s kind of how I pictured prophets – God is Leonardo DiCaprio and the prophet is just repeating what he’s been told by God. But instead, I learned that it’s a lot better to picture prophets in the context of people who are modern-day prophets for us. Looking at Martin Luther King for example, he wasn’t just getting messages from God. He’s not getting telegrams from God and walking up to the pulpit to read them out for people. Instead, he understood truths from God that other people didn’t, and he was willing to put his life on the line to share those truths with the world. In that sense, Martin Luther King operated as a prophet.

Isaiah is doing the exact same thing for 8th century Israel that Martin Luther King did for 20th century America. During Isaiah’s life, Israel was going through really tough times. It had been this glorious kingdom under Saul, David, and Solomon, but now it had fallen apart, split into two different, weakened kingdoms that were about to be taken over by foreign powers. Isaiah saw this political weakness as a direct result of Israel’s moral failings, and he had some pretty harsh words for the people of Israel. In the chapter before our reading today, Isaiah imagines God saying, “Stop bringing worthless offerings. Your incense repulses me. I hate your new moons and your festivals. They’ve become a burden that I’m tired of bearing. When you extend your hands, I’ll hide my eyes from you. Even when you pray for a long time, I won’t listen. Your hands are stained with blood. Wash! Be clean! Remove your ugly deeds from my sight. Put an end to such evil; learn to do good.” And in the chapter after our reading today, Isaiah says, “Yes, Jerusalem has stumbled and Judah has fallen, because the way they talk and act in word and deed insults the Lord, defying his brilliant glory. Their bias in judgment gives them away; like Sodom, they display their sins in public. Doom to them, for they have done themselves in!”

Isaiah is clearly fed up with the behavior of the Israelites and he isn’t mincing his words. But right in the middle of this diatribe bursts through this message of hope so quickly that it almost gives you literary whiplash. He takes a break from talking doomsday scenarios to say our scripture reading today. And I imagine it sounding to the people of Israel like this – “I have a dream that one day the house of the God of Love will rise up above all others. That people from all corners of the earth will come running to Love’s house, so that they can learn her ways and walk in her path. I have a dream that one day the law of Love will settle the disputes of all people. With nothing left to fight over, these people will destroy their weapons of war, turning them into tools for harvesting God’s abundance. I have a dream that one day war and fighting will cease. Come on, people of God, let’s walk in God’s light.”

This image is incredibly inspiring, I think. It’s a powerful vision of a day when we’re finally done with war. I imagine it like a weight being lifted off the shoulders of humanity – like we’ve been walking around with a backpack full of dumbbells that we finally were able to slip off. And part of what is so inspiring is the line about beating swords into iron plows and spears into pruning hooks. Not only do we decide to finally put down our weapons, but we also make it impossible to pick them back up again. We’re so confident that they’re completely useless as weapons of war that we turn them into something else completely – tools that can be used to prepare the fields for harvesting food and providing nourishment to those in need.

And this vision has inspired leaders around the world. The United Nations has a statue outside of its headquarters of a giant, muscular man taking his sword and physically beating it into a curved blade for a plow. Ronald Reagan referenced Isaiah’s vision when he spoke in front of the UN General Assembly in 1987. He said, “Cannot swords be turned to plowshares? Can we and all nations not live in peace? In our obsession with antagonisms of the moment, we often forget how much unites all the members of humanity. Perhaps we need some outside, universal threat to make us recognize this common bond. I occasionally think how quickly our differences worldwide would vanish if we were facing an alien threat from outside this world. And yet, I ask you, is not an alien force already among us? What could be more alien than war and the threat of war?”

The theme we’re examining this season of Advent is the theme of peace, and today’s topic is peace in our land. But as much as I’d love to stand up here and talk about United States foreign policy for the next 30 minutes, I have to admit that my opinion on how to find world peace is just as valuable as the stereotypical beauty pageant contestant’s – neither of us are going to do much about defeating ISIS or ending the civil war in Syria. But what if we redefine “land” to be a little less ambitious? Instead of focusing on finding peace in our world or in our country, what if finding peace in our land means finding peace in our church, peace in our community, peace in our family?

In what ways are we brandishing swords and spears that are preventing peace in these places? I think there are three primary ways we use metaphorical swords to create division in our family, our church, and our community. The first sword is the sword of pride. This is the sword we use when we know we’re right and everyone else is wrong, when everyone needs to just be quiet and listen to what we have to say, when we look at others as backwards fools who just don’t get it. Whenever we start a statement with the phrase “well actually”, we know we’re using the sword of pride.

Another sword we use is the sword of hurt. This is the sword we use to cover up our pain and our insecurities. Like a wounded animal we lash out at others in self-defense. We think that if we can project this sense of strength to the world, then other people won’t know how deep our own scars go.

And we also have the sword of fear, the sword we use to try to gain the upper hand when we’re facing the unknown. We pull out this sword when we’re facing uncertainty about our job, or our health, or the fate of our country.

In Boy Scouts, we had this rule called a blood line. Whenever you were whittling with your pocket knife on a piece of wood, you had to stretch out your arm and make a circle all the way around your body, and the line this circle made around you was called the blood line. Nobody was allowed to be inside of your blood line, so that if your hand slipped off the piece of wood you were whittling, nobody would be cut. But too often when we pull out these swords of pride, hurt, and fear, we don’t establish a blood line first, so we end up causing indiscriminate pain to those who are closest to us, both physically and emotionally.

And remember in Isaiah’s vision, the people don’t just put down their swords and decide to stop fighting. No, they destroy their swords and turn them into plowshares, the blades you put on a plow to turn up the soil and make it ready for planting. So how can we turn our own swords into plowshares?

What if we turned the sword of pride into the plowshare of understanding? Imagine our desire to be right being so strong that we can’t stop listening to other people and we can’t stop learning about the experiences of others, turning the sword of pride into the plowshare of understanding.

And imagine beating our sword of hurt into the plowshare of consolation. The theologian Henri Nouwen developed this concept of the wounded healer. He thought that people who hadn’t experienced pain didn’t make good ministers because they didn’t understand the experience of pain. Instead, the best healers are those who have been wounded in the past. He wrote, “The great illusion of leadership is to think that someone can be led out of the desert by someone who has never been there.” What if we turned our hurt into consolation?

And what if we took our sword of fear and turned it into a plowshare of solidarity? What if we used moments of uncertainty not as times to turn against one another but times to stand together in our shared ideals? Imagine responding to the feelings of fear and anxiety about things we can’t control not by retreating into solitude, but by having the courage to ask others to support us in our time of need, taking the sword of fear and making it a plowshare of solidarity.

Now I’ve gone this far into a sermon on the first Sunday of Advent without mentioning Jesus, which I’m pretty sure is sacrilegious. And you might be wondering why this prophecy from the Old Testament is considered an Advent text. But when we as Christians go back and read the Jewish scriptures with a Christian lens, we see Jesus in all sorts of places – this being one of them. When we hear of a time when all people commit themselves to the way of love, giving up war and welcoming peace, we think, “Wow, that must be what it’s like when Jesus comes back.” And that’s what Advent is all about, looking forward to the coming of Jesus – both the first coming of his birth and the second coming when the kingdom of God will finally be established for all people.

Jesus himself had an interaction with swords. When people came to arrest him right before his murder, one of Jesus’s followers pulled out his sword and attacked one of Jesus’s accusers. But Jesus responded like this – “Put the sword back into its place. All those who use the sword will die by the sword.”

Isn’t it time we stopped dying by the sword? Aren’t we ready to take the weight of war off our shoulders? As we look forward to Jesus’s arrival, let’s get a head start on turning our swords into plowshares. Let’s turn our pride into understanding, our hurt into consolation, our fear into solidarity. Let’s have peace in our land.