

“Claiming Utopia in Our Time”

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Memorial United Methodist Church
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[Lectionary: Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44]

Scripture reading: Isaiah 2:1-5 (NJPS); Matthew 14:36-44. Read also: Micah 4:1-4.

In 1515 Thomas More wrote *Utopia*, a story depicting a communistic democracy on a fictional island. The title is a pun on two Greek words: eutopia (meaning “good place”) and outopia (meaning “no place”), the idea being, I suppose, that nowhere is there a good place. (Certainly that was true for More, who 20 years later lost his head to Henry VIII.) To this day, when we contemplate a vision or proposal that we regard as “impracticably ideal,” to quote the OED, we will often dismiss it as utopian. Indeed, how often do we dismiss something as utopian in order to absolve ourselves of any responsibility for making it happen?

Certainly the book of Isaiah contains visions that one can describe, in this sense, only as utopian, that can exist only in an ideal world, that are clearly apocalyptic. For example, in the famous passage of Isaiah 65:25 (NJPS):

The wolf and the lamb shall graze together,
And the lion shall eat straw like the ox,
And the serpent’s food shall be earth.
In all My sacred mount
Nothing evil or vile shall be done
-- said the Lord.

And Isaiah 11:6-9 (NJPS) similarly depicts a messianic age when:

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
The leopard shall lie down with the kid;
The calf, the beast of prey, and the fatling together,

With a little boy to herd them.
The cow and the bear shall graze,
Their young ones shall lie down together;
And the lion, like the ox, shall eat straw.
A babe shall play
Over a viper's hole,
And an infant pass his hand
Over an adder's den.
In all My sacred mount
Nothing evil or vile shall be done;
For the land shall be filled with devotion to the Lord
As the water covers the sea.

That is not our world, not in our lifetimes, nor in any lifetime we can imagine. These passages are apocalyptic, messianic, eschatological; they are utopian. But that is *not* our scripture lesson for today.

In our scripture lesson for today, in the world of Isaiah 2, the wolf will not lie down with the lamb, the cow and the bear will not graze together, the lion will not eat straw like the ox, and no infant may with impunity pass his hand over an adder's den. Things evil and vile shall still exist. Violence will still exist. The poor, the sick, the imprisoned, the widow, the orphan, the stranger will still be there. Injustices will still occur. Disputes among nations will still occur. But swords shall be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. Not, you will note, into the 8th century BCE equivalent of Lexuses and TV's and iPods, but into plowshares and pruning hooks – that is, into tools for the feeding of the nations.

Thus, in this vision of Isaiah, the poor will be clothed and housed and fed; the sick and imprisoned will be visited and attended to; the widow and orphan will be taken care of; the stranger will be welcomed. Justice will be dispensed to those who have suffered injustice. And war will be no more. The vision of Isaiah 2 reflects not the end of time but, as verse 2 puts it, “the days to come,” a vision achievable in this world in our lifetime. Not an outopia but a eutopia. Not no place but a good place. Indeed, that this phrase – swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hook - has been carved onto the Isaiah Wall of Ralph Bunche Park across the street from the United Nations reflects the realism of Isaiah's prophecy.

Let me ask a question: Do we have the economic, technological, medical, and political resources to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, house the homeless, tend to the sick and imprison, care for the widow and orphan, welcome the stranger, and abolish war? We know the answer to that question. The answer is yes. For the first time in the history of the world, we have the ability to fulfill Isaiah's prophecy, *if* we have the will.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, the beginning of the new year. Advent offers a time of preparation. But preparation for what? Preparation, I would suggest, not for the *birth* of a child, but rather for the *resurrection* of the world. That is what we are preparing for.

Let me ask you this: what if each of us who call ourselves Christian – or Jew or Muslim or Buddhist or Hindu or every person of faith – wrote not a single card this season, bought not a single present for family or friends, wrapped not a single gift, attended not a single party, decorated not a single tree but instead, with boots on the ground, informed the powers and principalities of this world that no longer will we tolerate war or genocide or corruption or hunger or oppression or injustice or rape of our environment. It is done. It is over. No more. Never again. Just as smallpox has ceased to exist on the face of the earth, these horrors shall cease to exist, too. Now and forever. Petitions by the millions, demonstrations such as the world has never seen. Does anyone doubt that this could be done, and if done, would change the world?

It can be done, but will it? Let's talk for a moment about responsibility. Our scripture passage is not written in the passive voice: "plowshares shall be beaten." Nor, unlike in apocalyptic passages, is God the actor here; God is not beating the swords or spears. Isaiah says: "*They* shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks." Not God, *they*. And who is "they"? "They" is us. So not only *can* we do it, we *must* do it.

Prophecy takes many forms in the Bible: Sometimes visions, sometimes the foretelling of future events, sometimes condemnation of our having strayed from the path of the Lord, sometimes truth spoken to power. But sometimes a prophecy is also a commandment. The commentators pretty much ignore verse 5 of our lesson, but let's look at it:

O House of Jacob!
Come, let us *walk*
By the light of the Lord.

In our scripture passage, God is not merely telling us that swords shall be beaten into plowshares; God is commanding us to do so. We're Christians, so let's ask The Question: What would Jesus do? We know what Jesus would do. Jesus told us in no uncertain terms. Jesus, who stood foursquare in the tradition of Isaiah and Micah and Amos, is often characterized by New Testament scholars as a Jewish apocalypticist. And why do we call Jesus an apocalypticist? Why do we call his vision utopian? To marginalize him. To absolve ourselves of responsibility for obeying his commands. But Jesus was a prophet not of Isaiah 11 or 65 but of Isaiah 2. And Jesus made it crystal clear what we must do: we must feed the hungry and welcome the stranger and cloth the naked and visit the sick and in prison; and if we do not, we will go to hell. (Matthew 25:31-46) God has commanded us to beat this world's swords into plowshares and its spears into pruning hooks and to use them to heal the world. This is why Jesus tells us the kingdom of God has already come. And "Blessed are the peacemakers," says Jesus, "for they shall be called children of God" (Matthew 5:9 (NRSV)).

So what stops us? As I have preached before, the great irony of the Christian faith – and indeed of every faith of which I am aware – is not that it is so difficult but that it is so easy. "For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light," said Jesus (Matthew 11:30). Christ never demands of us what we cannot do although he often demands of us what we not want to do. He asks only one thing of us: to love God and our neighbor. Or as Micah puts it (Micah 6:6-8 (KJV)):

Wherewith shall I come before the LORD,
And bow myself before the high God?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
With calves of a year old?
Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
Or with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?
He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good;
And what doth the LORD require of thee,
But to do justly,
And to love mercy,
And to walk humbly with thy God?

The problem is *never* that we can't; the problem is *always* that we won't. Yet, as NIB puts it: "The poem is not a prediction but an affirmation that history *will* reach its goal." (NIB, vol. VI, p. 68 (emphasis added))

If I were asked to advise the leaders of the nations, I would say simply this: Beware the people of God – of all faiths – for they are as a sleeping giant. And when that giant awakens, as it surely will, governments will topple and nations will crumble and the ground will shake at their fury. And war will be no more. And injustice and corruption and starvation and genocide and oppression will be no more. Isaiah tells us that this *cannot* be stopped. We can each remain part of the problem or we can become part of the solution, but either way, this will happen, because the Lord has ordained it.

Amen.

Benediction: Go in peace. Do what is right. Serve God. Amen.