

Sermon November 27, 2022

Isaiah 2:1-5

“Beating Swords into Plowshares”

Our reading this morning takes place at a time when The Israelites were under invasion by Assyrian forces, and Isaiah addresses them with prophetic words, such as, “...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”. As with some many other prophetic passages in scripture the purpose was to give the people a sense of hope - which, of course, is the theme for this first day of Advent. Considering recent events such as the mass shootings this past week, hope is something we are much in need of.

Most of you have no doubt noticed that I have a tattoo of an anchor on my left forearm. Because of that I am frequently asked if I was in the Navy, which I was not. Let us be clear, the Navy does not have a monopoly on anchors. In the ancient world an anchor was seen as a symbol of safety. It was also one of the earliest symbols of the church. Pictures of anchors can be found adorning the walls of the catacombs in Rome. Specifically, it was seen as a symbol of hope. That idea is derived from a verse in the sixth chapter of Hebrews , which states, “We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus is a forerunner on our behalf...”

In other words, when we place our faith in Jesus , he becomes the anchor of our souls, and , in that regard, I think you may see a connection between the word’s safety and salvation.

Remember what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13 - “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three...”. And, so , in what ways does Jesus, the anchor of our souls, become our primary source of hope?

At the beginning of the Nativity story the angel Gabriel comes to Mary. Gabriel’s name means, “power of God” or “emissary of God”. When Gabriel speaks, we know God is speaking through him. He informs Mary that she is to have a child. She is perplexed by his announcement, but in the end she replies, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word.” It is with her acquiescence, her obedience, that the door is opened for the Word of God to become incarnate. And it is in Gabriel’s description of the child to be that we realize that this is no ordinary child, and certainly for an oppressed people, a source of hopefulness. He will regain the throne of David, reign over the house of Jacob, “and of his

kingdom there will be no end.” Then further on he “will be holy; he will be called the Son of God.” In other words, not only will he become the Word incarnate, but he will also be hope incarnate!

We also recall that in the first chapter of Matthew he draws from the prophet Isaiah, saying, “Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.” Matthew also gives us the meaning of the name - “God is with us”. Therein lies the very crux of Christian hope - we are not abandoned; we are not alone! No matter how bad things may seem in our lives, no matter how bad our own behavior may have been, it does not negate the depths of God’s love for us, and as proof of that love he sends us Jesus to be the “anchor of our souls” and evidence that “ God is with us”.

Jesus also informs us of his continued presence with us, particularly in terms of the church as a whole. In the eighteenth chapter of Matthew he says, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” And in the very last verse of the Gospel of Matthew, after giving the disciples their marching orders, the Risen Christ says, “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age”. His promise of continued presence reminds us that he is called Emmanuel, God with us, a source of hope.

Advent, again, points us to the Nativity, the birth of the child, who will be our source of hope, and this is borne out by various signs and symbols, such as, the bright star, the “ multitude of heavenly host”, and the visits of shepherds and wise men, but to find the primary source of hope we have to look beyond his birth to the end of his life. Hear these two different verses from 1 Peter: “Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God.” And “By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefined, and unfailing.”

These two verses tell us that our hope is grounded in God having raised Jesus from the dead, giving to us an inheritance of a “living hope”, meaning that it is a hope that propels us forward in life and in service with confidence and boldness.

But, beyond that we find a final source of hope, which is spoken of in many places in the New Testament, but I’ll just read this one from Hebrews - “ ...so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those

who are eagerly waiting for him". And, so, our hope is not only found in the resurrection of Jesus, but also in the promise that he will return.

This is good news - the promise that the Christ will return, but hope, that is, real hope has to be more than just visions of a distant future. Hope becomes real when the promise of a coming new age somehow impacts the present age!

One of the most influential books of theology in the last century was 'The Theology of Hope' written by Reformed theologian, Jurgen Moltmann. In it he writes, "Those with hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is, but begin to suffer under it, to contradict it. Peace with God means conflict with the world, for the goad of the promised future stabs inexorably into the flesh of every unfulfilled present."

Such hope, "makes the church the source of continual new impulses towards the feelings of righteousness, freedom, and humanity here in the light of the promised future that is to come." A former teacher of mine, Rowan Greer, put it like this, "Thinking in terms of heaven and earth allows heaven to be in some sense a present reality."

What they are saying is that contemplating the coming of Christ and a new age somehow makes us more deeply aware of the realities of our own age, and it compels us into action. Believing in the possibility of a better world helps erase our sense of futility and can encourage us to engage the present powers and principalities and propel us towards a more just and peaceful world. Amen.

Let us pray:

God, ever merciful and gracious, these are difficult times we are living through. The world and our nation are plagued by needless violence, racial strife tears at our national fabric as hatefulness is applauded by some, poverty and hunger persist both here and abroad, and we are faced with the downturn of the health of our earthly environment. Given all of this it is hard to be hopeful, to see the possibility of a brighter day.

This is why we are so anxious to feel your presence among us, to know that your love for us has not faded, that we can trust you to see us through. And, so, we look to your Son Jesus to rekindle our faith, to fill our hearts and minds with a living hope. May your Holy Spirit re-energize us, bring us to a new life in you, ready and equipped with what we need to meet the challenges of our day.

We ask that you bless your holy church, both here in this congregation, and with our brothers and sisters throughout the world, as we seek the ways in which we can best serve you. Grant to us the gifts of wisdom and discernment, as well as the clarity of vision we need, as we look to the many needs here in our community, as well as in faraway places. Teach us how to be your

hands and feet in the struggle to alleviate suffering and pain. Fill us with the love that is needed for the world to see you in us. Amen