

Today's assigned passages in the Narrative Lectionary are found in the Book of Isaiah. Jesus and many other New Testament figures cite the prophet Isaiah more often than any other prophet. Isaiah served during the reign of four kings. Israel, the Northern kingdom, had been destroyed by the superpower at the time, the Assyrian empire, which now threatened Judah, the Southern kingdom, where Isaiah lived. Isaiah is a contemporary of the prophet Micah. And like Micah, Isaiah proclaims a two-fold message of judgment and hope, warning of the destruction of the "lofty city," while also promising the rise of a New Jerusalem. Confession- today's full assigned reading was too long (including various verses of chapters 36 and 37) and was more violent and war-filled than I could handle this week. I don't know about you, but I don't need any more reminders of intimidation or using power to instill fear in others. Images of displaced Ukrainians by war already fill my thoughts as do images of starving children in Africa or abandoned children at the border as well as more innocent lives lost because of gun violence right here in the US. Sometimes it's just too much! It's more than I care to digest or am tempted to become numb or apathetic towards. Then I looked at the final selection for today's assigned scripture reading and that's where I felt God's Spirit leading...the alternative view of God's peaceable kingdom in Chapter 2. In Isaiah's vision God is held up as a God who "seeks peace and justice, who instead of teaching nations how to make war, teaches them how to live together, how to share resources, how to find nonviolent solutions in order to settle arguments" (Juliana Claassens, workingpreacher.org). Let us pray before listening to God's Word. **PRAY. READ. Isaiah 2:1-4.**

This week I came across a Thanksgiving poem from the late theologian Howard Thurman, who would've been 123 years old this past Thursday, entitled "A Meditation on Thanksgiving." Here is a selection from it: *For all these things I make an act of Thanksgiving this day: The seers who saw visions and dreamed dreams; the prophets who sensed a truth greater than the mind could grasp and whose words could only find fulfillment in the years which they would never see; the big hope that never quite deserts me, that I and all of humankind will study war no more, that love and tenderness and all the inner graces of Almighty will cover the life of the children of God as the waters cover the sea.* How can we- all of us commit to treating humans as precious and valued? Do we believe that there will be peace in the valley- someday- for each of us? What is God's dream for the world? Rev. Thomas A. Dorsey wrote "Peace in the Valley," the song David sang, originally for the Queen of Gospel music, Mahalia Jackson. When asked why he wrote the song, Dorsey said,

"It was just before Hitler sent his war chariots into Western Europe in the late '30s. I was on a train going through southern Indiana and saw horses, cows and sheep all grazing together in this little valley. Everything seemed so peaceful. It made me question what's the matter with mankind? Why can't men live in peace?" ([source](#)).

Isaiah's job as a prophet was to be the mouthpiece of God- and yet he also used his eyes, revealing what he saw in his visions. Right before today's passage, Isaiah lays out in graphic detail all that he has seen: violence, bribery, unfaithfulness, desolation, trampling on the poor, etc. "There are brief interruptions as God calls for repentance and offers glimpses of hope,

but they are drowned out by these pictures of violence and rebellion” (Lundblad). Until here briefly in Chapter 2, where Isaiah appears as if he is starting all over again, as he sees the future house of God, a glorified Jerusalem, as Isaiah once again announces who he is and what he sees. What Isaiah “sees” is not taking place now, but “in the days to come.” Even though the time is not specified, the announcement is concrete. Isaiah paints a vision of a new world to come, not the one mired in idolatry, injustice, violence and war.

This is not a prediction but rather a vision of a certain future that God promises. Here what Isaiah sees is not what the people are doing or will do but **what God is doing and will do**. And the prophet Micah saw this same vision as well (4:1-3). People of every nation will come to the mountain of the Lord’s house. The Lord’s house has been the temple or wherever God dwells. Humanity will stream to Zion- Jerusalem- including those who are enemies of Israel and Judah, and God’s dwelling place will be seen by everyone. This vision declares that the holiest ground will become the highest ground, as Zion will be known as the highest mountain of mountains. And why will the nations come? They will journey to the divine mountain to receive instruction, Torah, directly from God, and everyone will walk in God’s ways. God’s word will go forth, and God will judge the nations. The people will be transformed by God’s teaching. Can you see it? They shall beat their swords into plowshares, their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore (v. 4). Isaiah’s announcement is a vision of peace for all peoples, in

which the foreign nations come to Jerusalem to learn the ways of justice. “Nations will bring their desire and hunger, need and hurt, greed and grievance, and submit them to the authority of the One who is able to make peace, bridge division, and resolve conflict” (Anathea Portier-Young, workingpreacher.org). In other words, God is the mediator.

Isaiah isn't naïve. He is not a Pollyanna prophet. “There are many voices in the world eager to convince, ‘Be afraid! Be very afraid!’ Fear-mongering is an extremely profitable business. Fear can motivate people to spend money on things they don't need, to get out and vote, or to lash out at faceless ‘others.’ Fear can create bonds of unity that feel really great, ‘us’ against ‘them.’ Fear is the strongest motivation humans know, except for love. Internalized fear makes us believe that our security lies somewhere other than God” (Ogden). **Isaiah's vision is anti-fear.** His vision is of God's kingdom of love, peace & justice- where weapons of war are turned into farming tools, images of death-dealing turned into food-producing- **growing rather than destroying life.** This is a promise for the transformation of ‘days to come.’” (Barbara Lundblad, workingpreacher.org). In other words, peace will be so pervasive that there will be no need for weapons, and that material can be put to better use- eg. Guns into gardens- or as East TN native, Shane Claiborne, and his friends have done in Philly- they got together with some blacksmiths and welders and turned an AK47 into a rake and a shovel and another one into three hand trowels. Shane didn't become involved to debate gun control at first. No, he got involved because a 19 year old was killed on his porch in open

daylight. Shane reports that roughly 1 person a day dies in Philly to gun violence. Over 40,000 homicides occur in the US a year. It's too much- far away from peace. I can hear the ole gospel song in my head, "I ain't going to study war no more."

The promises in this text are utterly absurd when examined against Israel's ancient history. As much as we may long for this day, we often find it hard to believe that such a day will actually come. "Although Isaiah's mountain gives God's people a sense of direction, our feet are sometimes heavy with the mud and muck of present-day circumstances. We cannot move without seeing how we live at odds with God's vision for us; our endless quest for better weapons, the perpetuation of hatred and violence, our "fullness" but insatiable appetite for more (Yoder, WP). Yet, in these days of vitriolic twitter verse (WP, Joy Jay Moore) and war and rumors of war and tongue lashing various political parties or people who may be considered 'other,' these words from Isaiah can be a challenging comfort of promise. "As a word spoken into the shadows of our own world, Isaiah pulls us to our feet, continuing to promise that God is not done with us yet. The day has yet to come when all the world's nations and people flow as one to the foot of God's throne. At least not fully. But the promise has been made. It is the same promise God made to Abraham and Sarah... and is now extended to us through Jesus Christ. It is precisely for such a day as ours that Isaiah spoke. His images have power; they're encouraging and hope-filled" (Rolf Jacobson, workingpreacher.org).

Tom, a cynical journalist, was assigned to write an article in Esquire on Mr. Fred Rogers, who was also a minister, and out of this article, a friendship blossomed between Tom and Mr. Rogers (as well as inspired a movie). Tom writes of a time when Mr. Rogers encountered a little boy at Penn Station with a big sword who wanted to battle Mr. Rogers. The sword was really not a sword at all but a big plastic contraption with lights and sound effects. It was the kind of sword used by the heroes of the TV shows that the little boy liked to watch. This little boy didn't know who Mr. Rogers was at all, and he really didn't care who he was. But Mr. Rogers, who was down on one knee, stayed there until the little boy's eyes finally focused on him, and the little boy said, "It's not a sword; it's a death ray." Mr. Rogers snuck his face past the big sword and the armor of the little boy's eyes and whispered something in his ear- something that made the little boy look at Mr. Rogers in a new way, with the eyes of a child at last, and nod his head yes. Later, as Mr. Rogers and Tom were in a taxi, Tom asked Mr. Rogers what he had whispered to the little boy. "Oh, I just knew that whenever you see a little boy carrying something like that, it means he wants to show people that he's strong on the outside. I just wanted to let him know that he was strong on the inside, too. Maybe it was something he needed to hear" (Esquire, 1998, Tom Junod)? Maybe it is something we all need to hear?

Today's closing hymn, *Lead On, O King Eternal*, is over 125 years old and was written in the context of a graduation from divinity school- new ministers being sent out to preach the Gospel to a hurting world. I have

many colleagues who refuse to sing it because it sounds so militaristic. However, I invite you to see it in a new light. Imagine the battlefields being our current culture with Christ the King as our mediator. One group rewrote the first stanza to be more inclusive, but I don't think we have to do that. But just so you get the idea...here's the first stanza rewritten.

*Lead on eternal Sovereign,
we follow in your way;
loud rings your cry for justice,
your call for peace this day:
Through prayerful preparation,
your grace has made us strong,
to carry on the struggle
to triumph over wrong.
(New Century Hymnal, 1995)*

What trust does it demand of us today, to be led by God's teaching as we walk God's paths? What fears must we put aside in order to walk in God's ways? God's promise conveyed through the prophet Isaiah contradicts so much of what we see in the world. May we pray earnestly for the faith to believe that the peaceable kingdom is promised and coming. Amen.