

Swords Into Plowshares

Isaiah 2:1-5

Lessons from Isaiah: Images of God's Messianic Kingdom on Earth

Dr. Gareth W. Icenogle

Sunday, November 28, 2004

On the first Sunday in Advent, the historical focus is on hope--hope for things to come. We hope that the Kingdom of God comes to earth and is a pervasive culture in which all humanity can live at peace with one another. There is no war.

That is the theme of Isaiah: that all nations would dwell together without struggle, conflict, battle, or war. He is speaking to nations around world as the international prophet. But in that context, he also has a direct word to Judah, the nation that considers itself the centerpiece for God's people. Judah has it's own understanding of what that kingdom should be, and it's a nationalistic one, full of Zionism: the people of God will win the final battle and beat their enemies with the sword.

It is a conquest. But Isaiah says that is not the way it is going to be. There will not be the lifting up of these Israeli Judean people who are going to lead the world. No, God is going to be at the center of all nations, and God will draw all people to himself. But Israel rejected that vision of God, rejected the view that God would call them to be a nation of priests. They believed instead they should be a nation of warriors, and win. Isaiah speaks clearly of the Judeans' pattern of life. They are full of beaten, bleeding, and bruised people who have been wounded over countless years of battles. Their cities are burned and land desolate, devoured and besieged like Sodom and Gomorrah. There is no justice, only evil in the land. He goes so far as to say that Jerusalem has become a whore. The people of God have missed the point.

Sometimes in the church we miss the point. Bulletin bloopers from churches around the country list those things that reflect behind-the-scenes struggles, such as "Our youth basketball team is playing Wednesday at 8 p.m. Come out and watch us kill 'Christ the King.'" "Ladies, don't forget the rummage sale, a chance to get rid of those things not worth keeping, and don't forget your husbands." "The peace making committee scheduled for today has been cancelled due to conflict." "Remember in prayer, the many who are sick of our community." "Smile at someone who is hard to love and say hell to those who don't care about you." "Don't let worry kill you, let the church help." "The rector will preach his farewell message; afterwards the choir will sing 'Break forth into Joy.'"

God is not going to change the few, but God is going to change the pervasive culture of our families, churches, cities, nations, and the world. The values and relationships have to be re-established, with God at the center. And that's how Isaiah views this summary at the beginning of the prophecy. But God will not only be at the center of the people, He will be on the highest mountain. In those days pagans would put their shrines and temples on the high mountains. As Isaiah is speaking to the nations around the world, he is saying that God will be established at the highest place and power. God is the ultimate authority and will be among all people. God's culture will continue to pervade from center outward. People from all nations will come to be in God's presence because they hunger and thirst for Him. His presence is the main attraction. People come because they want to know and serve Him. All journeys of hungry and searching people end at the presence of Him.

It's my sense there are a number of people of faith from all over the world in Washington, D.C. They come here in silent hope of having someone show them the presence of God. We have a responsibility to give them a clear demonstration that God is here in our center.

According to Isaiah, all teaching and learning will become centered in God's presence. God is the source and foundation. God is the epistemology of all learning. The chief science will be theology again. The chief humanity -- divinity. All learning will be found centered in God.

A few years ago, I visited a new architectural structure of a high school. The academics, arts, and athletics

were placed in a horseshoe configuration. And I wondered, then, if we would ever see a time when the administration at the foci of such a school would ever be almighty God. That doesn't seem possible in our time.

Isaiah understands that which has been historically true -- that the Kingdom of God is both now and in the future. These things are happening as we are here today. Jesus Christ has already come, but the fulfillment of what we become, absolutely true for all people and places, will happen sometime in the future. God will change the culture of the entire world from the inside out. God's presence will be like a permeating epicenter of the entire nervous system of humanity. God will be the brain that brings peace to the rest of the body.

Louis Gerstner, in his book about the turnaround of IBM, "Who Says that Elephants Can't Dance," says this about changing corporate culture: "Culture isn't just one aspect of the game, it is the game. In the end, the organization is nothing more than the collective capacity to create value. No enterprise, whether in business, government, education, or healthcare will succeed over the long haul if the DNA is not changed." The DNA is the culture. God wants to change our interior culture and have it spread out to the world. Gerstner says it is hard for cultures to change. "You can't force it to happen. You can't mandate it or engineer it. You have to trust. Management can't change culture. It simply invites the workplace to change. In the end my deepest culture change goal was to induce the average IBM'er to believe in themselves again. To remind them who they are, you are an IBM'er".

God wants us to know who we are. You are a child of God. Your heart is the center of where God's mountain is. If you and your family can be changed, and your church, then it is possible that the global reality of war can be changed.

Another attribute of this culture is that God is at the center and will judge and arbitrate the people. I think, since the beginning of time, there has been a temptation for us, since the Garden of Eden, to be at the center of judgment. I think that was what drove Adam and Eve to take of that primal fruit. They wanted to be able to say what was good and evil on their own. They didn't want God to be in the middle of that. When they first discovered that they could make the choice and be in judgment of their own reality, they declared each other unclean and went off into the bushes to hide from one another and from God. We've been hiding ever since because the people around us pass judgment on us so easily and quickly.

That's what happened to Cain and Abel. Cain rose up to judge Abel. Abel did not fit into Cain's acceptable arena of good. So Cain declared Abel "evil" and declared himself "good."

Sometimes it is hard for men and women not to judge each other in relationships. It's always a struggle for women and me to find peace together. In deference to one of our members, I must use an illustration. It is from Bob Dole's book, "Great Political Wit." According to Bob, journalists often portray Elizabeth and Bob "as the only two attorneys in Washington, D.C. who trust each other. Some seem astonished that I am comfortable to share the spotlight with such a powerful woman. I am just glad that she lets me do it." In 1985 People magazine sent a photographer to follow them around and he took about 300 hundred photos. But only three made it into the magazine and one of them showed the two making their bed together. Shortly after that Bob got a letter from an irate Californian whose wife had seen the story, saying, "Senator, I don't mind your wife getting a job. I am sure she is well qualified for it. She's doing good work. But you've got to stop doing work around the house. You're causing problems for us men." Bob replied to him, "You don't know the half of it. The only reason she was helping me was because they were taking pictures!"

Elizabeth, please give my thanks to Bob Dole.

The warring world culture, God will change by being present in the midst. People from all nations, Isaiah says, will "beat their swords into plowshares." They will "beat their spears into pruning hooks." Their weapons of war will be turned into appliances for good -- their military academies into seminaries, their boot camps into ministry apprenticeships, their tank training into thanksgiving. Their field cannons into the field of studying God's canon of scripture.

I was recently touring the National Cathedral. Above the door to the room where the canons put on their robes, (a little play on terminology) is the masonry symbol of a group of little cannons pointing out--the humor of the masons. God's canons are those who speak the word of peace, not fire the shells of war.

Alexander the Great is more visible today because of the new movie. He conquered the world through war, the greatest warrior and army of all time. And Israel thought they would conquer the world by war. But Isaiah says world unity will not come that way. God will come into the midst of people and change their hearts. God will be at the center of all relationships and at the world center to bring peace. In God's presence and influence, we will beat our swords into plowshares because God has changed our hearts. We will not use weapons or competition. The ancient pattern of winning and losing will not make it happen. We will use intentionality and choice. We will want to make it happen because we are passionate about God and peace. We will hunger to do it; we will work hard to make it happen. We will beat our own swords into plowshares.

Jean Calvin commented on Isaiah's words saying, "there is nothing more desirable than peace, but while all imagine that they desire it, everyone disturbs it by the madness of their own lust, pride, and ambition. It leads people to rise up in cruelty against each other. Isaiah does not merely say swords will be broken into pieces but they shall be beaten into plows. He shows there will be so great a change that, instead of committing acts of injustice, they will be henceforth cultivating peace and friendship for the common advantage of all." People will choose because God is present to do that which brings peace.

Dallas Willard in his book "Renovation of the Heart," lists two key tools and weapons of war that all of us use. He reduces warfare to the lowest common denominator, which is our relationships in our homes. Those two key tools are "assault" and "withdrawal." Assault is an act against another person to hurt them, to murder, steal, lie, commit adultery, or dishonor. Withdrawal is an act of indifference. I don't care what happens to you. According to Dallas Willard, the heart needs to be renovated by the Spirit of God to help us to want to change those two warring behaviors. Assault comes even as a young child wants to have something another child has and will do what he can to take it away. But the other child resists and they become angry with each other. Then they try to harm each other. This is the story of Cain and Abel. This is assault. The hurtful behavior starts young.

Withdrawal is not talking -- the silent treatment. It is an action of weakness and fear -- hiding, separation, denial, divorce, abandonment, apathy, or indifference. In our sometimes cold world, our children are often in the line of fire between the assaults and withdrawals of parents.

These are the key tools of war. I submit that the sword is the tool of war that is used up close and personal, face to face, in hand-to-hand combat, and the spear is the tool of war used from a distance -- They are symbols of assault and withdrawal.

Willard goes on to say that investing a couple of hours a week in church isn't enough to bring about a deep heart change. What we need is places in our families and friendships on a day-by-day basis. We need the affirmation and accountability of close relationships gathered around us. We must identify the elements of assault and withdrawal that defeat love and right relationships to others and by insight and practice we must break away from them and reverse those patterns. By learning "a calm but firm non-cooperation with those poisonous elements and take initiatives and good will and give blessing and not curse." He notes there is a bumper sticker, "there is no excuse for domestic violence" and he suggests a bumper sticker for the church, "there's no excuse for assault or withdrawal in the home or church." Weapons of aggression or assault are blaming, shaming, name-calling, yelling, accusing, threatening, hitting, throwing, and so on. Weapons of passive aggression or withdrawal are the glare, the cold stare, denial, avoidance, silence, apathy, indifference, or triangulation (I'll talk to another person about my pain but I'm not going to talk to you. I'm upset with you), keeping a list of wrongs and bringing it out when I can do the most damage.

What Isaiah is saying is that God will become so pervasive in our hearts that we will want to change and we will turn our swords into plows, we will turn our attacks into affirmations, our curses into blessings, our hostility into humility. We will work hard at the change.

Notice the flow of this text. God comes and takes the initiative. He comes to be present in the midst of all the people and the people come to Him. God is the one who judges and arbitrates, but we have the responsibility of turning our swords into plowshares. God doesn't magically make it happen.

Willard goes on to say, finally, that there are four elements of transforming social life to which we need to pay attention. One is that we see ourselves as God sees us. We are blessed but not cursed. If we walk around seeing ourselves as blessed, we will do good to other people and not hurt them. The second is that we need to abandon our defensiveness. Stop attacking and withdrawing. We need to be willing to be known as we really are, our good and our flaws. And that leads us to a third point, that we should get rid of all pretense, stop being what we are not, stop putting on one face when we really have another. Be genuine and authentic, and be honest about our struggles. And the final point is to do good in society. Be a redemptive presence. Devote yourself to a life of service. Don't just stop being evil, but do good.

Willard asserts that when God is present in your life, you're motivated to live in those transforming actions. And who is it that ultimately leads us there? It is Jesus the Christ who comes into our midst and walks among us and becomes our light, the high mountain among us. We are drawn to Jesus because of His overwhelming desire for peace and grace. And when we encounter Jesus Christ, we are moved to stop fighting wars or we prove that we really haven't known Him.

Miroslav Volf, a professor at Yale, was doing a lecture back in 1993, during the major struggle in Croatia. He finished his presentation on reconciliation and embrace when Jurgen Moltmann, one of the great theologians of our day, stood up and asked if could he personally embrace a Chetnik? As a Croat, he knew that "for months the notorious Serbian fighters called Chetniks had been desolating his country, hurting people in concentration camps, raping women, burning churches, and destroying cities. Could he embrace a Chetnik himself?" "As a Croat, no I cannot, but as a follower of Christ, I think I should be able to."

And that brings us to the core of the tension we live in today. The kingdom of God is now, it's already; and it's in the future. It's not yet. Jesus Christ is here today, bidding us to become people of peace, so that in the future he will change the entire world from the inside out and create a global people of peace. As Volf says, at that moment Moltmann's question pulled him in two directions. On the one side, by the blood of innocent Croats who had been slaughtered, and on the other side by the innocent blood of God's Lamb, Jesus Christ, who had been slaughtered to give his life for those who are guilty of such things. And isn't that the tension we live in as Christians? We're tempted not to beat our sword into a plowshare because we still hold on to the sting of the one who inflicted the pain.

In Jesus Christ we are being invited to come close to the mountain of God, to give up the anxiety, pain, wounds, and vindictiveness, and to bring peace to our family, to the city, to this world. The Prince of Peace is here today. So let us put our faith into action. Let us turn our spears into pruning hooks, let us turn our weapons of hurt into tools of healing.

Amen.