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Isaiah 2:1-5

HOLIDAY SIGNS

You know when Christmas is approaching when all the holiday symbols begin to emerge around us. The angels, the wreaths, the sparkling lights, the candles, the Christmas trees, the manger scenes appear in stores, and on the cards we receive in the mail, and as the decorations we hang on our own Christmas trees. While they are pretty and decorative, these symbols are intended to convey a meaning, a message. In other words, they are signs telling us something. Take the dove, for example. The dove appears on a lot of our Christmas cards and as ornaments. We know the dove as a symbol of peace--that's its message. And peace is the message proclaimed to the shepherds in the field on that first Christmas. And peace is a message we know we still need to hear some 2,000 years later.

There are two biblical signs of peace, however, that I have never seen used on any Christmas card or as any Christmas tree ornament--and I would like to make a case for adding them to our array of holiday symbols. The plowshare and the pruning hook. The plowshare is the blade of the plow--the part that digs into the soil. In ancient times, if you were going to grow food, to plant crops, for the wellbeing of your family and your community, you needed a good plow with a strong plowshare. And the pruning hook was another agricultural tool with a hooked blade used for pruning vines and small branches.

I don't imagine you have ever received a Christmas card with the symbols of a plow or pruning hook on it. Nor have you probably ever hung an ornament of a small plow up on your tree. But I think there is the possibility of a whole new market out there for these wonderful symbols of peace.

It may be hard for us to imagine the plow as a symbol of peace but it wasn't for the prophet Isaiah. He's the one who introduced these symbols as signs of the peace God was going to bring to the people. He writes to his own people that when God's peace comes to earth, people will "beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks." In other words, they will convert the weapons of war--swords and spears--into tools for peaceful civilian purposes. Instead of tools for killing, the implements of war will be converted into tools for growing food, tools that sustain life.

Now, it's important to understand that Isaiah's words to his people required a lot of imagination and faith. And that is because Jerusalem at that time was a mess. The passage we read today comes from the 2nd chapter of Isaiah. But if you take a moment to read the 1st chapter, you will find a withering indictment of Jerusalem's political and economic scene at that time: filled with corruption, bribery, and greed, and cruel neglect of widows and orphans and the needy. Isaiah describes Jerusalem as a body that is thoroughly and utterly sick. He states that "from the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but bruises and sores and bleeding wounds."

Some among us might describe our society and our world in a similar way--as a place filled with bruises and sores and bleeding wounds. We read of wars and bombings. We read of exploitations and abuse. Our communities are divided racially, economically, religiously. Crime and corruption take place on our streets as well as in our government and corporate offices. The rhetoric of hate seems to be finding new acceptance these days. And the vulnerable still suffer.

So, perhaps we too need a dose of imagination and faith in order to have a vision of peace. Our reality tells us such a different story. And so it can be so hard for us to see signs of

God's peace around us. Much of what we hear, much of what we see, much of what we experience tells us about a harsh world of suffering and injustice and cruelty.

But into our Advent season Isaiah comes with his symbols of peace and hope. And he shows us how we can discover signs of God's activity, of God's presence, in even the most ordinary of items--for him, it was in agricultural tools. In the image of a sword being beaten into a plowshare, Isaiah offers us a sign of God leading us from war to peace.

It is true we live in a very broken world. But with some help from Isaiah, perhaps we too can develop the vision to see signs of where God is leading us from war and into peace. And like plowshares and pruning hooks, maybe they come in the trappings of the ordinary right among us. Signs of peace in the people and the circumstances right among us. Can we see them?

Fred Rogers is best known for his children's television program, *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood*. Many people may not know that he was also an ordained Presbyterian minister who regarded his children's programs as his special ministry. In the aftermath of some major tragedy, Fred Rogers was asked how to help children deal with the difficult news story. And he recalled that "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.'" Rogers added, "To this day, especially in times of disaster, I remember my mother's words and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers--so many caring people in this world."

Look for the helpers. Look for the people who offer compassion to those in need. Look for the people who give generously when others are suffering. Look for those who work for justice amid so much injustice. Look for those who seek reconciliation amid conflict. Look for

the helpers. Because they are signs of God's presence right here, right now. They are signs of God leading us from an attitude of war to an attitude of peace.

Have you seen any signs of where God is leading us from war to peace? By war, we mean all those attitudes of hostility, neglect, division, and greed. I found signs in some news stories this week. I heard a story about how more than 12,000 school children have written letters to President-elect Trump imploring him to be kind to all people. Another story was about the Parisian response to the vast numbers of refugees and asylum seekers living on the streets in Paris and in nearby camps. Some Parisian citizens have been handing out blankets and food to the refugees. But the story I heard highlighted one woman who decided to go further and take a refugee right into her home. Some other Parisians have followed suit, sheltering one or two individuals at a time, giving them a safe place to stay and helping them get settled. These gestures of peacemaking are tiny drops in a vast ocean of need. But they are important to those they help and they are important as signs of the light of God in the midst of darkness. God's activity of peacemaking goes on around us. Can we see it?

Advent invites us to look for the signs that Christ is coming, that the Prince of Peace is on the move. Can we recognize the signs? Do we even see them? Because we desperately need to see these signs, to celebrate them, and, importantly, to imitate them. It is far too easy for us to point our fingers at governments and at leaders who carry out aggressive action, who speak with words that divide or invite suspicion, who make policies that strike us as unjust. But it is a far harder thing to recognize that peace begins with us. And truthfully, peace is a very hard challenge for all of us.

Thomas Merton, the famous writer and theologian, supported the notion that each individual needs to work out peace in his or her own life in order for us to know peace on the

larger scale. He wrote that "Instead of hating the people you think are war-makers, hate the appetites and disorder in your own soul, which are the causes of war. If you love peace, then hate injustice, hate tyranny, hate greed--but hate these things in yourself, not in another."

So, this Advent, let's begin with ourselves. You and me. Let's begin each with ourselves. In our discouragement and despair, let us begin by looking for signs of God's peace around us because we can all learn from the helpers, from those who are carrying out actions of peace. We need these role models in our lives

And then, let's take the concrete steps to become signs of God's peace for others. Because creating peace is more than having good intentions. Creating peace necessitates concrete actions to move us from a mindset of war--which includes hostility, greed, and hatred--to a reality of peace; to move us from an wartime economy to a peacetime economy

So what about it? In this Advent season, what about taking one concrete step to turn our personal swords into plowshares and create peace. Perhaps an apology. Or an act of generosity. Or a step that will heal a division or a broken relationship in your family or in our community. Begin with one step. How can you become a sign of God's peace for others?

Plowshares are nowhere nearly as beautiful or graceful or romantic as a dove. Maybe that is why they never caught on as symbols of peace. But you know what? Plowshares were built for doing work. Plows till the barren, dried up earth with belief that through imagination and faith and hard work, new life and new growth can again emerge from the earth. True peace never comes any other way.