

Global Good: For the Sake of the Nations

*A sermon preached on Isaiah 2:1-5 by Emily Hull McGee
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC on December 1, 2019*

I.

I'm sure that the Thanksgiving leftovers are still languishing in your refrigerator. Your bags from holiday travel are still packed on the floor. (Or maybe it's just at my house!) That feeling you feel is probably a hangover from the sugar high of too much pumpkin pie or the glassy-eyes from too much football. Christmas music now follows you everywhere you go. You may already feel the churn of the season swirling around you, that churn that has you feeling like you're already behind – behind in buying the presents, decorating the house, setting up the tree, sending the cards, and having All the Shiny Fun with All the Shiny Things for All the Shiny Posts so that All can See how Shiny We Are. And here, in the midst of the swirl and the shine and the hyper-consumeristic sandwich of Black Friday, Small Business Saturday, and Cyber Monday – here we are, on this, the First Sunday of Advent... where in the most countercultural way, we Christians are asked to wait in the dark. We're asked to prepare for what will be. We're asked to consider another way. We're asked to turn away from all the shine and swirl and distractions and feelings of being behind, so that we can turn our full selves toward a peasant immigrant family in a back-woods town some two thousand years ago when God was born into the world.

It's a wonder this doesn't give us all whiplash, this dissonance!

II.

Throughout our Advent preparation this year, we'll be looking closely and listening carefully for the ways that the coming Christ child is good for the world. For in this age that slides so easily into a sense of radical individualism — what's good for me, my needs, my family, my community, my country is more important than anything else — what better reminder of the vast creation of which we are a part — all the nations, all the people, all the mountains and hills, valleys and pathways, streams and seasons. And the good news? God is with us — all of us, and all of us. All our redemption, all our savior, all our hope is drawing near for the sake of the world. We watch, we wait, we wonder together.

I imagine that type of watchfulness informed the prophet Isaiah as he heard and saw and responded to a word from the Lord, seeing the not yet in the right here. For you see, in Isaiah's time, the city of Jerusalem was achingly vulnerable, a gathered community always at the whims of the powers that be that held their potential for flourishing with a tight grip. Throughout the first chapter of Isaiah, though, we hear about this gathered community, the people of Israel whose devotion to the Lord had fallen away. In Isaiah's words, the people of Israel had rebelled — a people, he says, that were 'laden with iniquity, doing evil, dealing corruptly, forsaking and even despising the Lord.' In poetic form and devastating language, Isaiah lays out a clear case — Israel has turned away and forgotten the relationship that promises life. Now there will be consequences. Restoration to the Lord is possible — there is still hope, devastation does not have to be the final word! — but only following

‘profound, intentional changes’: showing love, caring for their neighbor, being obedient, choosing life.¹

That sets the context for today’s text in chapter two, where Isaiah does as he does – move beyond the threat irresistibly towards hope, imagining with bold vision a new future for Jerusalem. For this future is one where Jerusalem will be like the mountain of the Lord, where all the nations shall stream to it, where many people will come and go, seeking the Lord and his instruction. This future is one of international disarmament and peace, where weapons of war are not only dismantled but tools for sustaining life are assembled. This future is one of transformation of the earth and its nations, transformation of the economies and their instruments, transformation ‘from battleground to fertile garden.’²

Isaiah’s vision that turns swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, international disarmament that keeps nations at peace – ‘neither shall they learn war anymore’ – would have been heard by his listeners as reversing a common wartime slogan, like if “remember the Alamo” shifted to say, “someday they will forget the Alamo.” So complete is this vision, so comprehensive is the reach, so clear is the promise. Yet for them and for us today – why is that promise so terribly hard to realize?

III.

My dear friend Scott serves as Pastor of First Baptist Church of Christ in Macon, and he told a story to me and some other friends that goes something like this:

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, p18.

² Walter Brueggemann, *Texts for Preaching: Year A*, p3.

“Under a covered patch of brick in our church parking lot there hangs an enormous bronze bell. It dates back to 1887 and hung in our spire until a structural engineer submitted a report back in the 1960s telling us that might not be a safe place for it anymore. So we moved it to the parking lot, giving the children easy access to ring it most Sundays following worship — a “DONG!” that never ceases to startle some of us.

Yet, old as it is, this bell is not our congregation’s first.

Records show that our first bell was purchased in the 1850s and hung from the belfry of our sanctuary in its previous location. It too was made of bronze — 900 pounds of it — and we might still have it today, except in 1863 our records also show that our congregation voted to send this bell away to be melted down and molded into a cannon to support the Confederate war effort.

“Beautiful image as it is,” Scott says about our Isaiah text for today, “history tells us this side of the Kingdom of God we’re far more likely to do the opposite and beat our plowshares into swords.”³

IV.

That image of the other way — beating plowshares into swords, inflicting harm even unknowingly — is familiar to us. We have only to watch the news, look around our relationships, and examine within ourselves and see how we turn the promise of life into that which diminishes life. From our politics to our addictions, our drive to our distractions, our often-unstated wish to tear down, rip apart, and look past, we too often grab for the swords, that which springs of life and turn it into instruments of death.

³ Thanks to dear friend Scott Dickison who wrote about this beautiful story here: <https://baptistnews.com/article/swords-and-plowshares-cannons-and-church-bells/#.XePXXKi2ZOuV>

And we who claim Christ certainly aren't immune from stepping away from this promise. We remember Matthew's call for readiness, but know that such an instruction feels disconnected from our daily life, doesn't it? For we've been waiting for that unknown day or hour forever it seems! As one theologian said, "it's hard to stand on tiptoes for two thousand years."⁴ And in that meantime, the urgency fades. Life moves on. Distractions distract, and energies are redirected. We confuse the deep promise of everlasting hope with the flashy preoccupation with the present. We forget that God comes in the darkness, amidst the hardship, for the sake of the whole world — not just the shiny parts.

Our friend Paul Baxley said to a group I was a part of a few weeks ago, "Optimism is rooted in good weather. But hope... hope is rooted in resurrection."⁵ Another writer I love says this about Advent hope: "... hope isn't about magical results—it's about the long haul and the long darkness. Hope is robust and muscular and ferocious and long-suffering. Hope never gets so cynical that it can't be surprised. Hope finds and names God in the world's most desolate places. Hope kneels on hard ground and yearns without shame. Hope ponders and meditates and ruminates. Hope gets in apathy's face and says, "No. Not good enough. Try again." Hope sits in the darkness—outwaiting torture, humiliation, crucifixion, and death—until finally a would-be gardener shows up at dawn and calls us by name."⁶

⁴ As quoted by Rev. Doug Dortch, *A Time to Every Purpose: A Devotional Guide/Homiletical Commentary for Year A of the RCL*, p5.

⁵ A quote from the wonderful Rev. Paul Baxley, as shared with the CBF Discernment Commission in November 2019.

⁶ Debie Thomas, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/faith-matters/when-hope-gives-magical-results>

V.

I wonder this Advent what it might mean for us to live as if God's persistent promise of hope was true. I wonder what might happen if this promise that turns weapons of war into instruments of peace, a promise that asks for ready waiting instead of distracted killing time, a promise that looks like a child born to save the world — what might happen if we live as if this promise was being born in our midst? I wonder what might happen!

VI.

Scott's story of FBC Macon and that bell continued. For our part, over the last two years or so, their congregation had grown in a relationship with the African-American congregation around the corner that split from theirs around the time of the Civil War. In fact, they practically share the same name — one, the First Baptist Church of Christ and another, the First Baptist Church. Though separated by just a few hundred yards, the two churches have had very little to do with each other in the 150 years since their parting. And yet, because they believe in God's persistent promise of hope, they've seen to it to change that. Throughout these years, the two churches have covenanted to fellowship, to serve their community together, to hold a series of conversations around race and our shared history.

In that first year just before Thanksgiving, they met in one of the church's Fellowship Hall for a covered dish supper — sharing and enjoying each other's company, and feeling again the promise of life.

About that night, Scott said this: "Now, in and of itself, our coming together in this way is not a big thing. But as I looked around the room that night I couldn't help but think that in our own way we were taking what had

been a sword — our history, our inheritance — and beating it into a plowshare. We were taking what had wounded us for so long, and begun the slow, hard work of turning it into something that would till our souls enough for the Kingdom of God to grow in new ways.

He said, “now this may just be the preacher in me talking, but as we were leaving the church that night it seems like I remember some of the children ringing the bell outside in the parking lot, and for a second I thought it was the choirs of heaven rejoicing. But as I listened a second more, I was sure of it.”⁷

I wonder what might happen.

I wonder.

Amen.

⁷ Scott Dickison, <https://baptistnews.com/article/swords-and-plowshares-cannons-and-church-bells/#.XePXKi2ZOuV>