



“A Vision of Hope”
Scripture – Isaiah 2:1-4
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, December 8, 2019

In light of the times in which we live, is the vision of Isaiah about converting weapons of war into farming implements out of place? Is it simply on par with a Disney fantasy, or is it possible that it can capture our imagination?

Our reading begins: “The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.” Did you notice that it does not say, “The word that Isaiah *heard* concerning Judah and Jerusalem?” It says, “The word that Isaiah *saw*.” What does it mean to *see* rather than *hear* a divine word?¹

Isaiah experienced the word of God through visions, and rather than boiling them down to declarative sentences, he used language that would evoke vivid images in the minds of the people.

Isaiah’s visions were essentially of two types – judgment and restoration. The visions of judgment focused on the consequences of neglecting people in need. The visions of restoration promised that despite harsh times ahead, all would not be lost. The nation would not be utterly destroyed and some day in the future it would become a beacon of light to other nations.

The purpose of these visions of judgment and restoration was to motivate the people to change – to change their values, which, in turn, would change their priorities, which, in turn, would change their way of living. Using Isaiah as a mouthpiece, God called on the people to choose mercy rather than indifference, to choose righteousness rather than injustice, and to choose kindness rather than cruelty. It was no less than choosing life rather than death.

Isaiah shares a vision of a world that is radically different than the one we inhabit. He does not simply tell people to stop fighting with their adversaries and try to get along with each other; he shares a graphic vision. It is God’s dream for the world and Isaiah paints the vision with provocative poetry. “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 any more.” His words sketch a picture that sticks to our minds and embeds in our souls. Steel instruments of war that snatch away life can be converted into agricultural tools to support life. It is a vision of a future in which people stop killing each other.

The vision serves as a powerful symbol of hope. It taps a longing in the human heart for a day when people set aside bitter conflict and strife in favor of working together for the common good. We dare not overlook the fact that Isaiah’s vision is not one in which God works alone to bring peace to the world. Instead, it is one in which the people act. It is the people – not God – who turn weapons into shovels and rakes and hoes. And it is important

to note that the people neither bury nor destroy their weapons. Rather, they transform them into tools that benefit humankind. They become tools to prepare the earth to produce crops that will nourish and sustain life.

Many look at the world today with all of its violence, greed, injustice, and cruelty and fall into despair over the darkness. People of faith cling to the hope of a reality that is not yet realized. We envision a world with life-enhancing possibilities, and then we work hand-in-hand with God and one another to turn our hope into reality. Hope envisions a better day and fuels our desire to attain it.

But hope is fragile in our world today. Cynicism, fear, despair and anger are enemies of hope.

Riding the subway to work each day, Peter became increasingly “irritated by the rude behavior he witnessed...One day he decided to do something about it. He started an anonymous Twitter account, which he used to tweet pictures and descriptions of people’s terrible behavior on the subway. He quickly amassed thousands of followers – apparently, a lot of people shared his frustration. And it felt good, at first. But then he discovered that in order to keep his account compelling he needed to post ever more shocking incidents. He soon found himself spending a great deal of time and energy looking for things that made him angry...and this made him – angrier. And not just on the subway. The more he looked for things that riled his anger, the more prone he became to losing his temper at work and at home. There are many negative consequences to simmering anger, but the worst is that it slowly erodes our hope. Anger is toxic to hope. Anger slowly devours the belief that things can and will get better.”²

The vision Isaiah paints of a better world is not mere fantasy or foolish thinking. It is an evocative image designed to rescue us from our anger, our cynicism, and our fears. A new day will not unfold by passively waiting for God to unilaterally set things right. God reveals the vision of a better future and God provides possibilities for a new day, but God expects us to do everything in our power to create a less deadly and more life-giving world.

Can we insist that our political leaders pursue diplomacy and take every step possible before resorting to war? Can you in your own life pursue diplomacy rather than battle? Can you strive to better understand others? Can you train your eyes to see not merely the way things *are*, but how they *can be*?

“Richard Miles was 19 years old when he was arrested for murder. He was found guilty and sentenced to 60 years behind bars. He was an innocent man, but he spent 15 years in a Texas prison before he was exonerated. Looking back on the day he was released, he says, ‘I was overwhelmed. I was 34 years old, but I was really 19 by society’s standards. I had not dealt with the real world, and I was scared.’”

“He did not know anything about obtaining and holding a job, or many of the things you learn about the world in your twenties. Further, the world had changed so much in those 15 years he was in prison.”

“For two years, Miles struggled to get on his feet. Eventually he landed a job. Since he was found innocent, he received money from the state. But, rather than using all of the money on himself, he used part of it to provide reentry services for men and women released from prison. His own struggles and seeing other formerly incarcerated individuals in the same situation were the impetus to start what is now Miles of Freedom. It is a nonprofit in Dallas that assists individuals returning home from prison by helping them obtain identification, secure housing, and enroll in college. The group also provides computer and career training, financial literacy programs, and job placement.”

“Recognized as a *CNN Hero*, Miles was asked what helped him endure the years that he was wrongfully convicted and locked up. He said, “The first thing is my faith. Because when the judge said I was guilty, everything let me down. I felt the system let me down; the system is supposed to protect, it’s supposed to do justice. I went to church every day of my life. When I went to prison, I needed something...I could stand on.”

In addition to his faith, what helped him endure his ordeal and not be crushed by it was the wisdom his mother provided when she came to visit. Every visit she would say, “When you look out the window, don’t look at the bars, look at the sky.”³ And that’s what he did. He did not focus on the darkness. He focused on the light. And it made all the difference. Today he is mending broken lives. He is helping men and women who were on the verge of surrendering to despair to reawaken their hope.

“Najah Bazy can pinpoint the moment her life changed. In 1996, she was working as a nurse in Detroit when she visited an Iraqi refugee family to help care for their dying infant. She knew the situation would be difficult, but she was not prepared for what she encountered. She says, ‘At that house, I got my first glimpse of poverty...They had nothing. There was no refrigerator, no stove, no crib...The baby was in a laundry basket. I was so devastated by that I decided that this was not going to happen on my watch.’ That day, she and her family gathered all the furniture and household items that they could -- including a crib -- and delivered everything to the family. She has not stopped since.”

“For years, she ran her goodwill effort out of her home, transporting donated goods in her family’s minivan. Eventually, her efforts grew into a nonprofit that now supports impoverished women and children of all backgrounds in the Detroit area. The group has helped more than 250,000 people. The group's warehouse offers aisles of food, rows of clothes and vast arrays of furniture for free. The nonprofit also offers clients free education and job placement, as well as vocational training through its sewing and culinary arts programs. The goal is to help women become self-sufficient. Bazy says, ‘We help our clients move from a ‘hand out’ to a ‘hands on,’ because when you are in crisis...the idea of how to get yourself out of it is overwhelming.’”⁴

She is not Mother Teresa. She is an ordinary woman. Miles is not Nelson Mandela. He is an ordinary man. But each of them refused to simply accept the darkness they encountered. They believed that something better was possible and they endeavored to turn their dream into reality.

Isaiah invites us to catch God’s dream even if that dream seems wildly out of sync with our current situation. Because without the dream, without hope, we are surely doomed. But if we latch onto the vision, we will be discontent with the darkness in our world and we will strive to spread light whenever and wherever we can.

NOTES

1. Barbara Lundblad, “Commentary on Isaiah 2:1-5, *workingpreacher.org*, December 1, 2013.
2. Amy Starr Redwine, “Lost and Found: Crowds”, April 14, 2019.
3. Allie Torgan, “He spent 15 years in prison for a crime he didn't commit. Now he's on a mission to help others,” CNN.com, June 6, 2019
4. Kathleen Toner, “She started helping Detroit's impoverished community in her house. Now, her nonprofit has reached 250,000 people,” CNN, September 12, 2019.

Prayers of the People – Sudie Niesen Thompson

God of all creation — who ordered the swirling chaos and stretched out the heavens like a curtain; who sculpted the mountains and filled the earth with good things — you hold all life in your hand.

We can scarcely believe that you —Lord of the Cosmos — became flesh and lived among us! Yet, so great is your love for us that you entered into our brokenness. We rejoice that the One-in-whom-your-fullness-dwells drew near to us as a babe in a manger, that we might know peace, hope, joy, and love.

During this Advent season, we wait for you to draw near to us again, and we watch for glimpses of your new creation. We watch for the day when the wolf *will* live with the lamb; the day when nations *will* beat swords into plowshares. We long for the day when all people learn the ways of justice and joy and walk in your light.

For many of us it is hard to await your coming with hope, for there is so much that defies your vision for creation ... In this time of gathering darkness, when day fades quickly into night and the shadows of despair descend upon many, we seek your radiance in every corner of our world.

Send your peace upon communities torn by violence, especially the Naval Air Station in Pensacola, Florida. Send your hope upon those who are weighed down by injustice or weary from grief. Send your joy into hearts that are broken or lonely, and your love upon those in need of compassion.

Fill each of us with your peace, your hope, your joy, and your love, that we might focus our eyes on the light, that we might bear witness to the one who comes. Give us courage to carry Christ's light into the world, until you come to make all things new.

We pray trusting that you are the one who comes to set your people free. So, with the confidence of your children, we pray as Christ taught us:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.