

December 1, 2019
First Sunday of Advent

First Presbyterian Church
21 Church Street
Pittsford, NY 14534
www.pittsfordpres.org
(585) 586-5688

Rev. Jim Widboom

Swords into Plowshares?

Isaiah 2:1-5

At first look, Isaiah seems too bold to say that the mountain of the Lord will be established as the highest of mountains and all nations shall stream to it. Why did Israel and its prophets believe that Jerusalem, and the God of Israel was superior to all others.

Was not the god of Israel like the gods of all others tribes and nations, a national god, that fought and protected its tribe so the strength of the tribal god was equal to the strength of the tribe. Each successive great empire of ancient times saw its god as greatest, and the god declined only as an empire fell or dissolved.

Isaiah seems to be saying something different here. The God of Israel is not a national god, looking out only for the interests of Israel, but a god of all nations. From Jerusalem, God's holy dwelling, shall the teaching of the Lord come that will bring peace among all nations. The Lord will judge, will arbitrate, so nations will cease to collide but find common purpose instead.

Israel was beginning to see beyond the boundary of its own tribe to a time and place where war would end, with the lion and lamb lying down together.

+ + +

Now if you move ahead in the book of Isaiah, this theme seems to go away, as one contest and invasion after another is told. Israel's neighbor, Syria, allies with Israel's former northern kingdom and there is war, brother against brother. There are alliances with Egypt and finally the giant empire of Assyria overruns Israel and everyone else.

But what is remarkable is that this vision of Israel's god to arbitrate so all nations live in peace, seems to survive and remains a living expectation through generations in Israel's prophets and in a remnant of her people.

So what have we learned so far. What does Isaiah teach us. Beware of national gods, where religious faith claims superiority for its people and culture. Where it is said, 'We are the best because our God is the Lord.' This is not the faith of Israel, nor the way and faith of Jesus Christ. For there is a humility implicit in the faith of Israel, certainly in the tradition of the prophet Isaiah, and most certainly in the Christian gospel that claims all tribes and nations to be children of God.

Now there is something else that we can learn from Isaiah. The vision of the Lord arbitrating between all nations was preserved through great effort, in times of great loss, and it didn't die when Jerusalem was lost, and all Israel was taken into exile.

The fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah needs to be seen in fresh and new ways, not as an academic, miraculous foretelling of events in the future by ancient prophets, but as a hard-fought faith that the Lord kept alive, and was found to have life still at the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, sung in the song of Mary and sung by angels to the shepherds, perhaps even brought the wise men from the East.

+ + +

We need some freshness and newness in our Advent and Christmas faith. I listened to Christmas carols getting my hair cut two weeks ago. Some of the carols get so worn out they hardly hold meaning for us when we sing them. One fall I sat in a theatre waiting for the movie to begin. The trailers of movies to come ran one after another. And one with dark, violent scenes, very loud and sinister, ended with a black screen and huge letters that read 'begins on Christmas Day.' I spoke out, 'that is profane,' a lady in front turned and said yes, I agree.

The Christmas holiday takes a beating, and the sacred quiet of an ancient faith finding its fulfillment in the cry of a new-born baby remains, it seems, only with a remnant. But that is ok.

Isaiah sees the intention of God kept safe through centuries in Jerusalem as the Holy City of God, safe in the promise to the house of David that a king would one day be born who would execute this plan of God, and say that Israel's God, Yahweh, the Lord, is king of all nations and would one day judge, and arbitrate and bring peace to warring tribes and nations.

This is the content of the Christmas message that finds fulfillment in the birth of Christ. But let us remember that our witness to the Lordship of Christ isn't concluded on Christmas Day, but only begins, and that like the hope of Isaiah, its realization will be a hard fought fight of faith of the work of Christ in us and through us. Let us believe in the Prince of Peace, and live with extravagant, reckless faith that this ancient hope will come to pass.