

Gracious God, open our ears that we may hear your truth, open our eyes that we may see your kingdom, and open our hearts and minds that we might know the cries of our brothers and sisters who are hungry, and hurting, and sometimes even dying without the knowledge of your love for them. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

I was pleasantly surprised on Friday night to find a concert performance of *Les Miserables* on public television. This was the 25th anniversary concert taped in 2010. *Les Miz* is the longest running musical on Broadway and London's West End. It is based upon the novel by French author Victor Hugo that tells the story of Jean Valjean, a criminal who spent nineteen years in prison for stealing a loaf of bread but who is set upon the path of redemption by the bishop of Digne who exhibits forgiveness for a crime against him. The conflict in the story is with Inspector Javie who is the ultimate warrior for punishment. There is no room for grace in Inspector Javie's world. The conflict between these two characters sets the stage for a journey through grace to peace, the journey where we find ourselves on this first Sunday in Advent.

This Sunday marks the beginning of a new "season" in the liturgical calendar. The twenty-seven Sundays of Pentecost have come to a close. Today we begin the Season of Advent. The four weeks before Christmas are liturgically a "season of penitence," a time for people of faith to prepare themselves in every way possible to receive the greatest gift this world has ever received — the birth of the Christ child.

For much of the world, though, this weekend marks the beginning of four weeks of frenzy. Instead of being a time for reflection and repentance, preparation and meditation, the Advent season has become a frenetic fixation on getting the most "stuff" for the most people with the least amount of money.

In the church calendar the gloomiest, “blackest” day of the year, the day of Jesus’ crucifixion and death, is paradoxically called “Good Friday.” It’s “good” because it narrates the sacrifice that made new life, new earth and new heaven a reality. In the commercial world, the best day of the year is paradoxically called “Black Friday,” because while it puts consumers in the “red” it is the day that puts retailers in the “black.”

Instead of letting the world dictate what these four weeks before Christmas are about, let us take our cue from our ancestors. The traditional Advent wreath boasts four colored candles. Each candle represents one aspect of this season of anticipation and enchantment. There is a candle for peace, a candle for hope, a candle for joy, and a candle for love. On Christmas itself, we add a “Christ candle” to the center of the wreath, a kind of birthday candle for the baby Jesus.

Peace, hope, joy, and love. Those are the big “Final Four” of Advent. Who said you had to wait for “March Madness”? We have our own Advent Madness. Each one of these “Final Four” will be the focus in the next four weeks of our Advent sermons, primarily using the teachings of the prophet Isaiah to prepare ourselves for the great gift that we anticipate on Christmas Day. So, this year it’s an Isaiah Advent. This first week of Advent the word from the prophet is a message of “peace.”

Isaiah spoke to Judea and Jerusalem in the eighth century BCE, during surging sieges of battling empires that washed over and did their best to wash away the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel and Judea. First Assyria, then the “new kid on the block” Babylon, took away the Hebrew nation’s physical independence, political integrity, and singular religious identity. The Israelites were crushed under a foreign conquering power. The unique, favored relationship between God and Israel seemed to be extinguished.

But Isaiah offers a new vision for the Hebrew people. Isaiah's vision is rooted in the soil of God's providences and purposes. It is a vision of the future separated from political power and armed forces.

In this week's text, Isaiah 2:1-5, the prophet offers the promise of a wholly different future for those who identify themselves as belonging to "the house of Jacob." Instead of being overrun and outdone by conquering armies, Zion will become a magnet for those who seek the world's true magnate and "go up to the mountain of the Lord." Against the gravitational pull of this world's powers and principalities, these nations "stream up" to this mountaintop to reach new levels of relationship with God. Instead of seeking to destroy Jerusalem, to exterminate Zion, peoples from all the world will come so that God may "teach us his ways" and so that they may "walk in his paths."

But this is not the biggest news Isaiah brings to share. Isaiah proclaims that in God's own good time, in "the days to come," a profound and deep peace will come over the world. With God as the ultimate "arbitrator" and "judge," there will no longer be any cause for armed conflict or intervention. The beloved image Isaiah creates here is also repeated in Micah 4:1-4 — "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 anymore."

This plowshares promise is profound and persuasive. It comes from Isaiah's vision of a time when God's mission for humanity has been fulfilled and the power of the divine presence in the midst of humanity turns everyday life as we have known it into something very different. For all those who journey "up the mountain of the Lord's house," new life awaits. The gift of shalom is yours. Later in Isaiah we are told to "Remember the Rock, from whence you were hewn" (51:1). But here we are being told to "Remember the mountain" (cf. Luke 9:29ff), from whence your help and your peace comes." Or in the words of the

Psalmist: "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills. From whence does my help come? My help comes from the Lord,"

"In days to come:" that is Isaiah's visionary promise. It took seven more centuries for the birth of Christ. Plowshares and pruning hooks are hard to come by these days, but I guarantee you can buy a lethal weapon within blocks of your home. So, where is this "peace" in the twenty-first century?

Some cynic defined "peace" as "a period of cheating between two periods of fighting." Not very pacific. God's "peace" isn't some lethargic, sleepy-time, all-is-well, unlock-the-doors kind of moment. God's peace is an active, assertive, on-the-spot response to injustice and a lack of love. God's peace lives when we "Go up the mountain" and let mountain faith govern our lives and the mountain lion, the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, become our king.

As we enter into Advent, whether we want to or not, we will find ourselves singing all the familiar carols that promise peace. We are coming into the "Let There Be Peace on Earth" season of songs —from "Hark the Herald Angels Sing . . . Peace on earth good will" to "Do You Hear What I Hear . . . Pray for Peace, People Everywhere."

Yet why is it we have trouble remembering the words from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, whose Christmas carol ended with a sigh: "And in despair I bowed my head: 'There is no peace on earth,' I said: 'For hate is strong, and mocks the song of peace on earth, good will to men.'" The closest thing Christians have to a pilgrimage is a Christmas trip to Bethlehem and the Church of the Nativity. These Christmas pilgrimages to Bethlehem is what keeps lots of Palestinians alive, because the church is in Palestinian territory. It's only a couple of miles to Bethlehem from Jerusalem, but it can take half a day to get there because of all the roadblocks and barricades and walled enclosures you have to pass through to get to Manger Square and the Milk Grotto on the way to

the birthplace of the Prince of Peace. Longfellow was right: “hate is strong, and mocks the song of peace on earth, good will to men.”

That’s why to talk about God’s peace is not a fairy tale. God’s peace is a call to put on your hiking boots and struggle up the mountain, against the gravity of the status quo, against altitude sickness that comes upon those who attempt the impossible, against prevailing weather that pounds you back into prescribed patterns of living, against hypoxia and the lightness of being. In the final verse of this week’s Isaiah text, the prophet calls upon his listeners to “Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!”

In the plague-ridden fourteenth and sixteenth-centuries, 30-40 percent of Europe’s population was wiped out by the bubonic pandemic. But the mortality rates were much higher for one group of people: clergy. A few priests left their posts and ran away from home. But most priests and religious stayed faithful to their calling. They entered houses marked with the signs of the Black Death. They visited the sick and dying, gave last rites, and presided over burials. The plague doctors—at least those who hadn’t run away—were forced to care for a disease they knew nothing about. So, when they made their house calls, they showed up in the weirdest hazmat suit ever concocted. Here is one description of the outfit in Paris in the 16th century: “a sponge strapped to his nose, garlic on his tongue, shoes with cymbals, a gaudy, powder-streaked blouse that had been steeped in ‘magical juices,’ a waxed tunic of racy red leather (waterproof for fouled air), and a headdress with spectacles or inset stone eyes and a long birdlike beak/nose containing sweet ‘medicines’ to cleanse the air” (p. 213 Of Fiona Ross, *Dining with the Famous and Infamous* [Rowman & Littlefield, 2016]).

That’s not how we turn swords into plowshares. We don’t climb the mountain in a hazmat suit to protect us from all the hazards and defilements and

dangers of the world. We climb the mountain with plowshares as our staff and hiking boots as our surety.

There are “walks” for every worthy cause imaginable these days. Good people with great hearts sponsor walks for breast cancer, all other cancers, Alzheimer’s, heart disease, muscular dystrophy, multiple sclerosis, and autism — just to name a few. Walk in these walks, they are good paths to follow.

But as followers of Jesus, we are called to walk a steeper path. We are called to walk “up the mountain.” We are summoned to climb Jacob’s Ladder, higher and higher, with all the other peoples of this world. We are invited to ascend beyond the horizons of the norm to the “mountain of the Lord.” There we find the ultimate cure for what afflicts all of humanity. We are called to walk up that mountain to find the peace of God, the peace that passes all understanding because it’s the peace that comes layered with repentance, forgiveness, grace, and love.

God’s “peace” does not necessarily come about by a wholly peaceful process. In Isaiah’s imagery “they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks”. Yet as violent as a sword’s mission is, the job of a “plowshare” is also disruptive. The plowing implement used by farmers during Isaiah’s day, and for centuries after, consisted of several parts. The “plowshare” was a vertical, steady piece of metal welded onto the actual furrowing apparatus, the “moltboard.” The moltboard was the big wide blade that “dug the ditch” to break up the earth. But blacksmiths typically welded together into one unit the “plowshare” and the “moltboard,” so the “plow” itself was one working element.

What the plow, the “plowshare,” did was to surgically enter the earth and then turn it over, inverting the soil in order to bring new, richer topsoil for planting. The plowshare makes it possible for a new, richer soil to be exposed

and planted for the next crop. But it's still surgery. It's still forced entry into the earth.

Our new existence in a life of peace that Isaiah envisions is brought into being by this upheaval that these newly formed "plowshares" bring to the world. Reshaped from weapons of war into tools for life and health, these "plowshares" nonetheless turn things "upside down." The kingdom of God, or simply Shalom, is brought to life by the plowshare of God's peace, as it turns and churns and burns the fields of this world. The plowshares of peace overturn old, compacted earth, overturn old compacted ideals and expectations, overturn old barren ways into new sources of creation.

When swords are beaten into plowshares, the very soil of this earth is turned upside down. In that new state, it becomes more alive, fertile, and open to new life. That is the power of Advent Peace. Life given new possibilities. Your life given new possibilities.

Thanks be to God. Amen.