First Sunday of Advent

Nu1uanu Congregational Church

November 27, 2022

*City of Hope* Isaiah 2:1-5

As I was reading and studying to write this sermon, I kept coming across comments about a statue that stands on the grounds of the United Nations building in New York. The title of the statue paraphrases the passage from Isaiah we just heard. It is called, *Let Us Beat Our Swords Into Ploughshares.*

The bronze sculpture, which stands about 14 feet high, is the work of Evgeniy Vuchetich, who was quite famous in his native Soviet Union. It depicts the figure of a man, holding a hammer aloft in one hand and a sword in the other hand. He is hammering the sword into a ploughshare, a tool to till the land for crops. It is supposed to symbolize the whole world’s desire to put an end to war and transform tools of destruction into tools to benefit humankind.

I have never seen the sculpture in person. However, after just seeing photographs of it, I can well imagine it being deeply impressive, and I wanted to start off by talking about this sculpture because it was gifted to the United Nations by the Delegation of the (former) Soviet Union on December 4th, 1959—almost sixty-three years to the day. It was presented during Advent of 1959, on behalf of the Soviet Delegation, to Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjold, who accepted the sculpture on behalf of the United Nations—on behalf of the whole world.

Now, depending on your frame of mind, or sense of history, the presentation of this sculpture may seem either refreshingly naïve, or deeply ironic (bordering on sarcastic), because as we know now, this was an era when our country and the USSR had been deeply entrenched for some years in what has become known as the Cold War—a conflict based around the ideological and geopolitical struggle for global dominance.

Happily, we did not engage in direct, large-scale warfare. However, both superpowers supported major regional conflicts in other countries around the world—proxy wars, the secret (and not so secret) support of insurrections and revolutions—which kept the whole world in a state of simmering animosity and suspicion.

I wonder if anyone on that cool December day in Manhattan sixty-three years ago remembered that the quote on the base of the sculpture was from the Holy Bible? Did the Soviet Delegation? If they had, hopefully, they would also have remembered that this promise of peace and the creation of a community that sustains and supports life comes only after God, in the preceding chapter of Isaiah, has admonished and brought the people to judgement.

Grace is a gift. Unfortunately, human beings only seem to be prepared to receive God’s grace *after* having followed our own ways of violence and hard-heartedness toward other people and even creation. It seems to take so long and so much for humankind to become aware of our sinful ways, to be fully aware and awake—yes, *woke*—woke to the destruction and desperation all around us. Therefore, throughout Isaiah, the people are being shaken out of their slumber, called to account for the way in which they had abandoned God’s ways.

Thus, in the very first chapter of Isaiah, we are told of God’s indictment of the people of Judah and Jerusalem. God’s judgment is upon them because of their idolatry and because of their failure to *“do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, (and) plead for the widow.”* [1:17]

These were the sins that had brought judgement and exile to the people of Isaiah’s day. Please notice how each point of the indictment describes a broken relationship—personal relationships, but also institutional/community responses to the needs of whole categories of people.

Notice also how each failure leads to the loss of dignity and well-being for others. This is God’s message to the people of Judah throughout chapter one. However, when we get to the passage we heard this morning, the beginning of chapter 2, instead of continuing to preach on the threat of war and exile, Isaiah reveals God’s ultimate vision of peace and hope, not only for the people of Judah and Jerusalem, but for all nations.

In the few verses we heard, Isaiah relates vision God has given him of how, one day, all nations will put aside their cynicism, their fear, their violence and desire for dominion over others, and instead reach out toward the same desire for the end of hostility and distrust.

So, we begin with anger and judgement, and then God extends mercy. However, instead of a sudden out-bursting of hearts and flowers where, in an instant, all of us go our merry way, God’s response will be to hold us all to account. The nations will be judged. *We* will be judged, and that judgement will be evident in the ruined cities, the ruined land—the oceans, mountains, and prairies—and in the ruined lives of the people.

For many of us, this is the good news and its news we have been waiting to hear and we find ourselves almost giddy at the thought of it. Until we realize that *all* are included in the word, *we.* We are glad that judgement is promised to those we believe guilty, but we forget our own participation in the broken world we live in. One writer has 12put it this way:

*“It’s tempting to envision ‘them’ finally getting the judgment they deserve, forced to turn over their weapons, whether material or spiritual, to see their weapons hammered into life-sustaining tools... What a comeuppance!*

*…until I consider the weapons* I *hold onto for dear life…Am* I *willing to lay down my sword and my spear?*

*What are* (each of us) *willing to lose in order to gain that mountaintop?”*

In the passage we heard today, Isaiah does not only *hear* the word of God’s compassion and hope, he *sees* it. He *sees* the people of all the nations journeying in huge throngs. He sees us coming together—all of us reaching toward the same thing: wholeness of body, mind and spirit—all of us reaching toward the hope that is in the healing of all people and peoples.

Isaiah sees people who have finally humbled themselves, have finally silenced the conceit, pride, and self-deception we have all lived with for so long, and have come to learn, to listen, and to be changed.

This is where hope lies—in our commitment to listen, and to be challenged and changed by what we hear0. Like Isaiah, our hope lives in our commitment to *see* the word of God—that is: to come face-to-face with one another, with who we are, and what we need, and then to be faithful to God’s grace toward us by responding with compassion and grace toward others.

Do you grow weary of hearing this?

This *is* where hope lives, but do you grow weary of hoping, and then hoping against hope that things will be different? Many of us are weary. Right in this moment, there are many here in this Sanctuary that can produce a long list of times when their hopes of all sizes and goals, even hopes for peace, fellowship, and kindness have been crushed, and it is difficult and tiring to get up and begin to place our hope into one more moment.

And I would agree if that moment was of our own making and our own design. However, there is another moment we can live-into, and that moment is now, it is a moment we have come to call Advent

In this moment, on this Sunday, we light a candle and call it hope because it is lit—not by our light but by the light of Christ. In his light, we are invited to see the same hope that Isaiah saw and held out to the people of his time, and holds out to us, even today. Indeed, it is the same light, the light God has held out to us since the beginning of all things, and which is sent to us again in Christ.

What is more, if we look for it, we will find that Christ’s light is all around us, like the chrismons we saw earlier. We are shown the light that is kindled by compassion and determined hope in places like the organization we honored at last Tuesday evening’s Nu’uanu Valley Interfaith Thanksgiving service.

Last Tuesday, we honored a project called called *Kina ‘Eha* and it provides an “alternative education option to young men and women that are in need of and seeking purpose, personal empowerment, education, Hawaiian cultural identity and connection, workforce training in construction and the trades, community service and leadership.”

When we look at the some of the demographics of the young men and women in the program, we come to see that these are more than fine words. *Kina ‘Eha* serves young people who:

* 100% of them are Native Hawaiian.
* 35% are under 18 years old.
* 65% are 19-24 years old.
* 70% are from Waimānalo, Kailua, Kāneohe, Kahalu’u, with the remaining from the Waianae Coast and Hawai’i Island.
* 83% have dropped out of high school, yet 100% have self-selected to participate in the program.
* 52% were houseless when they entered the program.
* 100% have never been tested for learning differences.
* 100% have used drugs and alcohol.
* 96% of them are from low-income families and receive government assistance.

This is where the light can be found and we must look for it. The light is also found in smaller gatherings where a meal has been lovingly prepared, and no matter how long it takes the guests to get there, the hostess of this meal waits with patience and kindness.

These are just a couple of ways that we can see God’s hope, but there are others. There are even many others. It does not always seem like it, but it is true. There are many others who have had the same vision Isaiah had, all those years ago, and invites us to have. We are invited to see the light of God that sometimes does struggle but continues to shine.

And Advent is the time and the light of God, which desires to take over all of our time, and seep into all of our darkness.

And so, it was not naive or ironic that a delegation of the former USSR brought a symbol of hope that was born in a faithful oracle of God, nor that they did it during Advent because Advent is hope.

It is the hope of God that is being born into our world, and promises that the reconciliation and redemption, which are Christ’s birth promises, are not lost or separate from the world. They are born again with him and he calls us to follow him and be his people in this same sad, greedy, vulgar and beautiful world. His birth, which Advent anticipates and promises, will be a light in the darkness and the darkness will not overcome. Amen.