

## "Hope and Peace"

Isaiah 2:1-5; Romans 13:10-14

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

December 7, 2014 – 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent – Rev. Ronald Botts

You can dig deep in the earth of the Somme Valley in France and find that the soil there holds a unique history of civilization. There's evidence from early humanity right down to the modern era. You might find a flint hatchet used by man 50 centuries ago, and in the next spadeful fragments from WWII. One might have crushed the skull of an ancient enemy, while the others could have killed American soldiers.

There they lie together, rock and steel, common in the sense that they were both weapons of destruction. They reflect a primitive approach on one hand, and a highly sophisticated one on the other. The old one could destroy but a single person at a time, but the military shell could annihilate dozens or even hundreds at once. They chart human progress as they lay there together. Progress of a sort.

We turn to the beginning chapters of Isaiah and find the prophet's concern for a lack of advancement on the part of the people of Judah. It was a decline in humanitarian behavior that brought about his indignation. He perceived that people were really moving backward in the way they dealt with each other.

The words come as a vision to Isaiah: "Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth; for the Lord has spoken: I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.

"Ah, sinful nation, people laden with iniquity, offspring who do evil, children who deal corruptly, who have forsaken the Lord... Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the orphan, and the widow's cause does not come before them."

This is an indictment of Jerusalem and its people, always looking for ways to get ahead and largely unconcerned with the plight of others. The rich are getting richer and the poor getting poorer. They are quite willing to rise on the backs of those less fortunate. Yet, they continue to offer their sacrifices and go through the motions of keeping the religious rites. They pray, but there is no sincerity in their words. The hypocrisy of the people is what the Lord detests most.

Yet, inserted into this gloomy picture of alienation between humanity and God, there is a word of hope that follows judgment. The promise of forgiveness is held out for even this sin if the people of God will change their ways.

What would it look like if men and women were to live in proper respect to God and with each other? That vision is contained in the familiar words that make up the central thought of our Old Testament lesson today.

“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.”

Here the people of God would be a blessing for the world. They would be the Lord’s agents of redemption. They will lead by example and be a powerful influence on all others, because that is God’s will. They will usher in a time of peace like never before. Isaiah brings a powerful message of warning, but also an equally powerful one of promise.

Peace. What a profound word—positive, desirable, needed. It’s a word charged with the universal longing for harmony on earth. It challenges the mind and heart as it has for centuries. St. Augustine wrote long ago, “Peace is so great, that even in this earthly and mortal life there is no word we hear with so much pleasure, nothing we desire with so much zest, or find to be more thoroughly gratifying.”

When we read the prophet Isaiah we wonder why the ancient Israelites couldn’t see the handwriting on the wall. Surely it must have been obvious that they were going the wrong direction in life. Were they blind? Didn’t they realize what they were doing to themselves and their children? What’s so hard about putting faith and daily living together? Why were they so hard of heart and yet so quick to offer acts of praise?

The Israelites did miss the full picture. They failed to grasp their situation and, for the most part, continued in their accustomed ways. They glorified power, but not that which belonged to God; instead, they bowed to the almighty denarius. They were too busy looking for self-pleasure to be bothered about the legitimate needs of others. They failed, not because of God’s lack of favor, but because of their own self-absorption.

Thank goodness we’re not like those ancient Israelites. Thank goodness that we in this country don’t exalt power. Thank goodness we don’t glorify violence. Thank goodness we take care of each other as though true brothers and sisters. Thank goodness we are not caught up with the material things of the world. Thank goodness we are sincere in our faith and live accordingly! No, it’s good that we’re not like those ancient Jews. It’s good that we don’t have to hear those old prophetic words of warning and then apply them to us.

In just a little over two weeks we will celebrate the birth of one who has been called the Prince of Peace. That is no benign title, but one that aptly describes the Messiah. “For a child has been born for us, a child given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.”

Jesus made it very clear that to follow him would not always be easy nor necessarily leave us popular with everyone. He did not guarantee to make us rich nor keep us out of controversy. But he did tell us that he would show us what God’s will is for us and bring us new life out of old. If we choose to follow him, we must do so in his footsteps or our allegiance means nothing. We must sow seeds of peace rather than tend a harvest of discord.

A man tells of walking in the dusty streets of an Arabian village and meeting a boy playing a flute. The man asked to see the flute for it seemed a heavy, awkward thing. On examining it he discovered that it was made out of an old gun barrel. The boy explained that he had found it abandoned on a nearby battlefield, filed it down, and had his uncle drill holes in it at his machine shop. Now it is a musical instrument.

In a sense that's what we are also called to do, to take weapons and attitudes of destruction and to turn them inside out to become celebrations of being. We are to affirm life, rather than to deny it; lift people up, rather than shove them down. We are to be accountable to the Lord and remind others that they are as well.

Behold, the Prince of Peace is coming and his way is the only way the world will be saved from itself. It is a warning of possible disaster, but—importantly—it's also a promise of hope.