

He Will Judge

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church on the 1st Sunday of Advent, November 29, 1992. Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 2:1-5; Matthew 24:36-44.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Some of you may have read in the paper about the man in a depressed region of Appalachia, a coal miner out of work for months, who caught his children on the back porch thumbing through a Sears Christmas catalog, wishing. He flew into a rage, switched their legs, tore the catalog to bits, and sat down in his yard and cried like a baby. He loved them so much, he couldn't bear to see them wishing for ^{what} he knew they couldn't have.

I thought of that unemployed coal miner when I read ~~to you the~~ ^{early last week,} Isaiah's vision of the later days? The prophet foresaw a world where everybody wants to learn about the Lord of Judah. The nations stream to Jerusalem to learn about the Lord. The Lord, rather than the rulers of the nations, ~~shall~~ judge between the nations and ~~shall~~ arbitrate for many people; they ~~shall~~ beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation ~~shall~~ ^{does} not lift up sword against nation, neither ~~shall~~ ^{do} they learn war any more."

Like that unemployed coal miner there was a brief moment when I was tempted to say, "Don't listen to this crazy utopian dream!" As I thought about this vision of Isaiah, I believe I heard the Prince of Darkness whisper to me, "It's all a dream. It's nothing more than a fools dream." I was tempted to rip out that page from the Bible, sit down and cry because I don't want us to hope for what can't be?

As I speak, thousands of men, women, and children in Somalia will starve to death because of war madness. In Bosnia and Serbia people who have lived together for years are torturing, raping and killing one another. There's an attempted coup in Venezuela. And ^{in Jerusalem} the mountain of the Lord's house, of which Isaiah speaks, is an armed camp. Israel has become a byword for superior military technology. Palestinian Christians and Moslems

^{abuse of civil rights}
have lived in concentration camps for close to fifty years. Every day we hear of terrorist attacks and reprisals.

There seems to be no less hatred, greed, brutality or cruel indifference now than there was two thousand years ago when Jesus was born, or twenty-seven hundred years ago when Isaiah saw the word of the Lord concerning what was to happen in days to come. Is it realistic to hope that in the next hundred years or even in the next thousand years we'll reach the point where there'll be no more war and when we'll take the billions of dollars spent on defense and use them to build hospitals and rebuild cities?

Can we really expect human nature to change when some of us can't even make peace with a neighbor or fellow church member? ^{or husband/wife?} When brother and sister don't speak to one another for years because of some slight? ^{Parents/children -} The hard evidence seems to indicate that the human race will someday come to an end, leaving no memory that it ever was.

How can we possibly believe or hope for the vision Isaiah tells us will come true in days to come? Don't you think sometimes it would be better to rip the vision of Isaiah, and others like it, out of the Bible + set down and cry ~~that~~ ^{lest we have no dream for what we can't have?}
A purpose of the church is to show people that this dream of Isaiah, will happen.

The church is to be a visible sign that God rules and his Word is true.

One of the strangest stories I ever heard took place on Christmas Eve in 1914. World War I was only a few months old. The Germans and British had shoveled miles-long trenches in the French farmland; ditches from which men blasted at one another with machine guns and mortars. In these muddy, rat infested trenches, British soldiers opened Christmas greetings from their King while a few hundred yards away German troops read a message from the Kaiser.

Between the trenches lay no-man's land, a zone of barbed wire, craters and shattered trees where anything that moved was instantly fired at. The strip that

separated the trenches was so narrow that, when there was a lull in the fighting, each side could hear the clink of cooking gear from the other.

Late, on Christmas Eve, a British soldier standing guard heard, from across no-man's land a home-sick German soldier singing, "Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht..." The British soldier instantly recognized the beloved Christmas Carol, "Silent Night", and began to hum along. Then he chimed in with the English words, singing an odd duet with his enemy beyond the barbed wire. Another British soldier crawled to the sentry station and joined in. Little by little others on both sides picked up the song.

The Germans broke out with a second carol, "O Christmas Tree" and then the British replied with, "God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen." On and on the antiphonal singing went. A British soldier with binoculars reported that the Germans had hoisted a ragged evergreen with lighted candles in the branches to the top of a sandbag barrier. When dawn broke, Christmas day, signs appeared on both sides, in two languages, proclaiming, "Merry Christmas!"

Then, defying all logic and everything that makes sense, one by one the soldiers started laying down their guns, they crawled under the barbed wire and around mortar holes into no-man's land. At first there were only a few brave men that dared to go; then many British and German troops met together in the first light of Christmas day. The young soldiers brought out pictures of their mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters and wives. They exchanged gifts of candy and cigarettes. Someone brought out a soccer ball and they had a soccer game.

Then it was all over. By mid-morning, their officers had called the men back into the trenches. Soon the sound of machine guns broke the silence. The war dragged on four more years, nearly destroying a generation of young German and British. But there must

have been an indelible memory in the minds of those who lived to recall that ^{strange,} first Christmas at the front. The memory of a few hours when their master had been neither King nor Kaiser, but the Prince of Peace. And with that memory, perhaps, even hope that God would one day accomplish the vision of Isaiah, *when sword's...*

We'll soon leave church. You may have a quarrel on the way home from church or at the dinner table this afternoon. You may have an ugly confrontation with parents or children this week. Tomorrow you'll re-enter the work world rife with conflict, infighting, back-backing and back-stabbing. But the Word of God as seen by Isaiah makes us aware of a new world, new hope, new possibilities, new dreams.

Stanley Hauerwas, a Methodist minister who teaches at Duke University, was meeting with a group of students shortly after the United States bombed military and civilian targets in Libya about six years ago. A debate raged about the morality of that ~~act. Some students thought the bombing was immoral, others thought it was moral.~~ At one point in the argument, one of the students turned and said to Hauerwas, "Well, preacher, what do *you* think?"

Hauerwas said that, as a Christian, he could never support bombing, especially of civilians as an ethical act.

"That's just what we expected you to say," someone cynically responded. "That's typical of you self-righteous Christians. You get so upset when a terrorist guns down a little girl in an airport, but when our nation tries to set things right, you get upset when a few Libyan terrorists get hurt."

The assumption was that there are only two political options: You're either a conservative who supports the attack, or a liberal who condemns it. But there's a third option. And I believe that those who know the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ must

resist the temptation to buy into either the conservative or the liberal political option.

Hauerwas responded, "You know, you have a point. What would a Christian response be to this? A Christian response might be that tomorrow morning the church announces that we're sending a thousand missionaries to Libya to instruct them in the word of the Lord and to teach them his ways."

Someone shouted out, "What an arrogant response! Who are we to teach them the way of the Lord?"

And Hauerwas responded, "We're the church. That's what we're supposed to be doing."

Another student said, "We can't do that because it's illegal to travel in Libya. The government wouldn't give the missionaries visas to go there."

Hauerwas said, "No! That's not right. I'll admit that we can't go to Libya, but not because our government won't let us. We can't go because we ~~no longer have~~ Christians ~~that could do~~ something this bold. *don't have the courage or faith to do*"

And then he said, "I pray for a church that asserts that God, not nations, rules the world, that the boundaries of God's kingdom transcend the boundaries of the nations of this world and that the main political task of the church is the formation of people who see clearly the cost of discipleship and are willing to pay the price."

I think he's right. Only then will we know and see that the word of the Lord that Isaiah saw is really true.

Let us pray: Faithful God, your promises stand unshaken through all generations. Renew us in hope, that we may be awake and alert watching for the glorious return of Jesus Christ, our judge and savior, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.