

Gonna Lay Down My Burden

Isaiah 2:1-5; Mt. 34: 36-44;

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First Sunday of Advent

First Congregational Church UCC

Burlington, VT

Sing: "Gonna lay down my burden, Down by the riverside (3x)
Gonna lay down my burden (1x) and study war no more"

That beloved old African-American spiritual comes straight from this morning's Isaiah reading: "Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore". We can only conjecture about its meaning for those African-American people suffering under slavery before the Civil War. What burden were they laying down before ascending the mountain of the Lord? Surely they were not carrying weapons! Were they referring to laying down the burden of their earthly lives and crossing over the Jordan River into heaven? Less metaphorically, maybe they meant the burden of slave work and crossing over the Ohio River into freedom? What burden do we need to lay down before crossing the river?

"Gonna lay down my sword and shield"

Again this comes straight from scripture, but it's difficult to imagine why people who had been so violently treated themselves would be able to reject violence and speak up for peace. It's not surprising, however, that this spiritual became one of the anthems for the non-violent civil rights movement. Check in with any baby boomer, and we'll be able to sing it for you.

Also in this verse, we are invited to "Come, walk in the light of the Lord!" The season of Advent begins today, and during this time we remember the coming of Christ in two different ways.

The first way is what works for the secular world as we lead up to Christmas. We tell over and over the first Christmas story with ease: the birth of a poor little baby in the manger, the great celebration that came with it along with angels and shepherds, and then, borrowing from a different gospel, we focus on the gifts the magi brought him. Unfortunately, in these days of marketing and huge commercialism, any talk of gifts is a justification for selling. Sometimes don't you wonder just exactly who it is that is coming? Maybe it's not baby Jesus for most folks anymore, but instead Santa Claus. Santa Claus is coming. Evidence of his approaching arrival is everywhere and it has been since before Thanksgiving. The only antidote we have to that commercialism is to tell the simple story of the humble birth of the best human being ever born and what he accomplished for all human kind. That's the real story of Christmas past and present.

The second aspect of Advent, though, is one we'd often prefer to skip over. In the reading from Matthew this week it comes to us full force, impossible to ignore. Before his death, Jesus spoke to his disciples – and to us - about the end times which will come all of a sudden and only God knows when. When you mix together the words from the gospel and the images from the book of Revelation, you get the modern day version of the fundamentalists' apocalypse, the popularized version being Hal Lindsey's rapture in "The Late Great Planet Earth."

The topic of the Second Coming of Christ is not too popular with liberal, mainline Protestant Christians like us, most likely because it gets all mixed up with these other fundamentalist versions of the end times. Soon after Jesus' life, it WAS like the end of the world for the people of Israel, because Roman troops came and destroyed their temple and scattered their people far and wide.

In our time we can think of lots of scenarios in which our world might come to a sudden end. At the beginning of the 20th century just over 100 years ago, there was a great optimism about human society, about the war to end all wars, and the progress in

social movements. But then there was the Great Depression, the Second World War, the unleashing of nuclear weapons, and the genocide not only of Jews but of other populations around the world. In the last part of that century we began to see how we were destroying not only other human beings, but also the resources of Planet Earth. We have created conditions for super viruses to cause devastation in world health. The very divisive society in which we find ourselves causes us despair. We forget that we are creatures born of hope.

Hope is what the prophet who spoke in First Isaiah was trying to sow among his people, as he painted the picture of God's Holy Mountain at the center of the world, attracting all people to itself so that they might learn of the one God and that God's ways of wisdom and peace. He imagined that they could change their ways of greed and vengeance and instead become people of peace and prosperity, cultivating and sharing prosperous fruits of the earth.

The people listening to First Isaiah were pretty downtrodden. Foreigners had already trampled over their land, destroying buildings and crops and carrying away people. God was sick of their empty religious sacrifices and instead wanted them to be upstanding, just and kind people who treated one another with respect and dignity. Because the people did not respect the covenantal behavior to which they had agreed, God has turned away.

Hoping to comfort them, to bring them to repentance and new life, Isaiah paints a poetic image of God's Holy Mountain which is very beautiful.

- All nations shall come to Zion lifted high above all others
- They will invite each other to learn all of God's ways and to walk in God's paths
- The word of God and its instruction shall go out from Jerusalem
- God will be the arbitrator between nations
- They will beat swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks
- They will fight no more

Those are two very different visions of the future, between Matthew and Isaiah. We have the apocalypse of terror and exclusion and in contrast, the coming together of all God's creatures, an inclusion of everyone in peace and sharing. Which vision do YOU want to focus on? Does God's ancient poetry inspire us to hold on to a positive version of the future?

As usual, the anthropologist in me became a little curious about the well-known image of beating swords into plowshares, and spears into pruning hooks. It can't be all that easy to do.

I learned that meteoric iron had been used for some purposes during the end of the stone age, but it was not very easy to manipulate. Nor could they work the iron oxide of the soil. Both required technology to create high temperature furnaces that could both get rid of impurities and add enough carbon to make the material strong.

Archeologists first thought that the ability to smelt iron ore originated first in Anatolia in Turkey and spread fairly quickly east and west through cultural diffusion. Have any of you read Jared Diamond's popular book, "Guns, Germs and Steel"? It is a fascinating overview about the development of cultures around the world, and how the societies were affected by their environmental circumstances. Diamond theorizes that it was much easier for cultural inventions to spread east and west across land masses that were of similar climate and without any great barriers. In Eurasia, for example, cultural diffusion happened quickly. In Africa and South America, however, there was a change from summer to winter crops, and the barrier of a tropical rain forest between temperate zones meaning that many cultural innovations happened more slowly in those two continents.

But in fact it seems that iron metallurgy may have appeared in sub-Saharan Africa (which unlike Europe and Asia never went through a Bronze age at all) as well as India

independently of the Middle East. In fact, the African forges were able to reach even higher temperatures than those in the Middle East and produced a superior quality of steel only achieved much later in Europe.

My unanswered question is this: which came first, the iron weapon or the iron agricultural tool? I couldn't seem to find a good answer to that question on Google yesterday: maybe the answer is that it was simultaneous, at least in those cultures that previously had bronze. But what of the Africans who were just emerging from the stone age into metallurgy? Does the human brain think first of weapons when inventing, or does it imagine tools to increase productivity? Is there any way to know?

Perhaps that is an absurd question by this point in human evolution, as our ingenuity has developed very complex and effective weapons and tools for all sorts of purposes. The underlying issue is one I've long speculated about, and that is whether human beings are primarily peaceful and cooperative, or primarily aggressive and greedy.

The premise behind a vision of God's Holy Mountain is that human beings are capable of learning the ways of peace, able to resolve conflicts with civil and nonviolent behavior, for thus God created us to be. We are able to come together and cooperate across our differences. Does technology have to be at the service of violence, or can it be used to serve human good?

Our state of mind easily affects our behavior and has a powerful role in how we relate to others. Many religious traditions advocate centering prayer, often called mindfulness, as a spiritual discipline. Whatever the outside circumstances, as long as we are well, we can choose how we feel and what our attitude will be. That, in turn, will affect how we relate to others. Maybe that's what Isaiah was trying to say to the people of Israel.

Isaiah saw God's shalom, God's justice, as a light that would bring life to all people. He believed that if the people themselves could become the light, that others would be attracted to that light and come to learn God's ways. What kind of people would they choose to be? What kind of people will we choose to be? What will be our quality of spirit, the attitude of our hearts, our frame of mind?

This first Advent is the Sunday of hope. So today we leave wondering: what good is this one candle of hope lit in a darkening world??

For the ancient Hebrews listening to Isaiah, it meant that that in spite of the judgment against them, there was a vision of hope that God offered.

For the people of Jesus time, suffering through the occupation of the Roman army, the candle of hope was more about a way of being that could be make a positive difference in their lives. You are a light set upon a hill, Jesus told them. The light burns not because of what is, but because of what might be.

What does one candle mean in our world, in our midst today? That candle can teach us to hope, to hold on to a vision of God's future that is more positive than the apocalyptic terror that is so easy to imagine. What matters, that candle reminds us, is how we choose to live, who and whose we choose to be.