

Advent 1 Year A  
Isaiah 2:1-5  
December 2, 2007  
Bill Ellis

For the fourth week in a row our lessons today look ahead to the completion and fulfillment of all things. It has gotten a bit boring actually, but next week we are on to John the Baptist. In the mean time if it sounds like I am saying today pretty much exactly the same thing I have said in each of the past three weeks, there is a reason for that. I *am* saying today exactly what I have said in each of the past three weeks. In the face of this series of passages I can think of nothing else to say that is both relevant to the texts before us and to the situation in which we find ourselves in this world. But today instead of using the Gospel text as a focal point I am going to use our passage from Isaiah. Not only does it make the point I wish to make - and have been making - most clearly, it includes the famous statement with which I ended my Veterans Day sermon on November 11<sup>th</sup>. So it seems to me that this passage will help close the circle on this series of readings, and bring to completion for now at least my thoughts on the issue of the call of peace in a world of violence.

The vision Isaiah had was not one in which his religion triumphed over all other religions. It was one in which his God - The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob - triumphed over all other gods. The result of this triumph would be that all nations would learn to walk in the way of God, that they would be instructed

by God and would submit all their differences to the arbitration of God. The result of all this is not that everyone worships alike; it is not that everyone thinks the same things; it is not that everyone adopts the same kind of social and economic structures; it is not even that nations cease to exist. The result of receiving the instruction of God, the word of the Lord that goes forth from Jerusalem, is that “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 any more.” The sign of the triumph of God’s will over the whole earth is not to be found in some decisive violence that brings about the peaceful kingdom simply because all the enemies of that kingdom have been slaughtered, but rather it is to be found in the complete renunciation of violence by the nations of the world that brings about the peaceful kingdom because all peoples have been reconciled one to another under the judgment and arbitration of God.

This is amazing stuff, at least to me. We fulfill God’s will, as Isaiah today declares, not by imitating the violence we see all around us, striving all the while for some ever more perfect version that finally becomes decisive, but precisely by breaking that cycle of violence once and for all. Now I must be clear; though I remain hopeful that this renunciation will happen before it is too late for the human race, I do not think it will happen any time soon. Today wars are often rendered inevitable, and at times I suppose even necessary, by the actions of nations pursuing what they conceive to be their own self interest. This of course is the point. Wars are a way for nations to fulfill their goals and impose their

wills; they are not the way to fulfill God's will and vision for humanity and the earth. No matter how justified any of us may believe any particular war to be, wars are a movement away from God's will, a movement away from the fulfillment of the vision of Isaiah we see in today's reading. No matter how noble the cause, war is the result of the human refusal to be instructed by God.

We need to remember this; no matter how any of us might feel about the wars that we have fought in the past, or the war we are fighting right now, we need to remember this. For there are people in this world who will tell anyone who will listen that war is the means of effecting God's will. War is the means of bringing about the kingdom. In the west we see it most obviously in the so-called Jihadists of a certain kind of radical Islam, for after all, they are our enemies, and it is the easiest thing in the world to identify the sins of your enemies. Those people are constantly invoking the blessing of God on their efforts to bring about the demise of their many enemies, foremost among whom is the United States. Those people are wrong. God does not bless their efforts, and never will bless their efforts, for what they are doing is moving away from the promised fulfillment of the kingdom, not toward it. But we also need to understand that there are Christians in this world who believe that God blesses and sanctifies our violence against them, and who believe that our violence is the way to the kingdom.

It isn't the way to the kingdom. If there is a single thing I have learned from my recent study of violence in scripture and history it is that we don't get to

the kingdom of God by imitating the methods of those who are moving us away from it. To be sure, some wars in human history have been justified as the only means to stop horrible outrage, or prevent the spread of dehumanizing tyranny. But fighting wars that in the end we agree are necessary does not mean that we are doing something holy that accords with God's vision for the world. On the contrary, the only thing that the resort to violence ensures is that sooner or later more violence will follow.

Our passage today echoes many other passages of scripture in declaring that this endless cycle is not God's will for us. But it goes further than that by declaring that the way we can tell that nations have submitted themselves to the arbitration of God is that they give up violence. Remarkably enough it is the only test given here, the only proof offered. If you want to know whether or not a nation is following the instructions that "go out from Jerusalem" to use the image of this lesson, then the question you need to ask is how violent are they? How close are they to beating their swords into ploughshares?

I realize that this way of stating things is oversimplified, particularly given the incredibly tangled up mess we face today in the Middle East. I realize also that foreign policy is not now, and never has been, made by referring first to scripture. I am not suggesting that I know how to run this or any government. But I am speaking of the trajectory of scripture, of the indices that scripture invokes to suggest what life ought to look like from the point of view of God. I am saying further that we who want to follow God, who want very much to be

instructed by God, need to take what we hear today very seriously as we struggle to understand what direction we feel called to go. We are all called to be peace makers; we are called to work toward that moment when the world renounces violence, and this is true even of those who find themselves in the military. Some of the most peaceful people I have ever known fought in wars, and part of what made them peaceful is the experience of warfare itself. Those of us who have been spared that terrible experience cannot really imagine what it is like no matter how many books we read or films we watch. Indeed, it is quite possibly our warriors who are best positioned, and therefore most called, to be our instructors in the ways of the Lord.

I believe that this season of the year is a good time to listen well to that instruction and to begin to act on it. For we are now in Advent, the time when we prepare for the Incarnation of Christ. It is time to take stock of who we are and where we are going. My prayer this Advent is that we may all receive instruction from God and so become peacemakers. By that I mean that we first make peace with ourselves, that first we renounce all violence against ourselves. Give up the self recrimination, the perfectionism, and its opposite, the need to fail. Give up the inability to forgive yourself for things you have done and left undone in the past. Having made peace with yourself, then work to listen to God so that you might make peace with others. Remember, making peace with others does not mean agreeing that they are right and you wrong, except in the rare cases where that is true. It does not mean adopting other people's style or

way of looking at the world. It does not mean thinking just like others. It means renouncing violence against them; it means renouncing that bitterness of soul that holds grudges and harbors resentments. Then, having made peace with ourselves, and peace with others, we just may then be able to be a little part of the way that God moves us toward peace in this world, and so move ever closer to that moment when all of us together walk in the light of the Lord.

