



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

Peace and Imagination
First Sunday of Advent, Year A, Isaiah 2:1-5
November 27, 2022
The Rev. Paul McLain

'They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks.' In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

It has been a violent year in our city, nation, and world. We are eager for the new beginnings and new hope offered by a new church year starting today and a new calendar year a month from now. But our hearts are still heavy from the jarring violence of this past year. With so many incidents of violence in our city and nation and the ongoing war in Ukraine, we can easily move from the heaviness in our hearts to feeling numb, which is even more unsettling. Underneath it all, we still hurt.

That longing to stop the fighting, stop the violence is at the heart of our Old Testament lesson from Isaiah today. It begins with Isaiah's vision of people from all nations gathering atop a holy mountain, as close to the presence of God as they can get. In this vision, they are all gathered there to be instructed to learn at the feet of God the ways of justice and peace. The justice of God is meted out not by might or war, but by listening to the concerns of the people and arbitrating them with fairness and equity. As the people in the vision learn to accept God's judgments, their reasons for envy, greed, resentment, retribution, and fear are abolished. Their weapons of war are no longer needed. Instead, they are reimagined and refashioned into tools for cultivating a garden – a peace garden. The instruments of violence and death become the implements for giving and sustaining life.

In 1983, during a time of U.S. military involvement in central America and an acceleration in the nuclear arms race, Fred Rogers tackled the very adult issues of war and peace during a week on his children's television program, Mister Rogers' Neighborhood. At the beginning of the week, Friday the Thirteenth, the King of the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, learns that the neighboring kingdom of Southwood has placed a mysterious factory order for one million parts. The King says, 'If Southwood has a million, we will have a million and one.' Lady Aberlin tries to dissuade him, saying, 'Uncle Friday, we *don't even* know the people of Southwood. The King retorts, 'We know that they *might* be building bombs.'

This dialogue was Fred Rogers' understanding of the wisdom of Isaiah that the path to peace begins with listening and understanding, the best counters to fear of a people you do not yet know. Lady Aberlin joins Lady Elaine, the village contrarian, in going to Southwood to meet a former classmate named Betty. Betty tells her two visitors, 'Well, you will never find a war down here. In fact, hardly anybody ever comes here. That is why Southwood is building a new bridge – to make it possible for other people to come and visit.' It turns out the million parts they ordered

are not for bombs, but for a bridge to connect them with their neighbors. Lady Aberlin and Lady Elaine discover that Betty and the people of Southwood are much like them. They want the same things – good food, new friends, and peace. They go back and let King Friday know about their visit and what they learned about the bridge. He calls off the war and declares everyone, ‘generals of peace.’

Unfortunately, his kingdom is now bankrupt due to ordering the million and one parts, and he cannot afford to fulfill a prewar promise of giving a record player to the school. At a peace party between the people of Make-Believe and Southwood, one of the attendees figures out a way to convert some of the parts that were ordered into a record player. King Friday then orders that all the parts be used to make record players to be sent to every school in the world.

Fred Rogers ended the week by posting the words we read from Isaiah on the television screen, ‘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.’

Michael G. Long, one of Fred Rogers’ biographers, writes, ‘For Rogers, our vocation as neighbors is to imagine the goodness we cannot always easily see: enemies as individuals who are like us, bomb parts as components for record players, and unwise kings as founts of wisdom. With the right vision – a moral imagination that sees people and places as positively good – we can begin to envision the peace that is possible.’

The Isaiah passage ends, ‘come, let us walk in the light of the Lord.’ The word Advent means ‘coming,’ and the light that is coming into our world is Jesus, the source of our moral imagination. This season is a time of waiting and watching for his light.

We may assert, we are a non-violent people. What can we do to stop the violence around us? What we can do is cultivate hearts of gentleness, tenderness, and compassion toward those around us, toward our world, and toward ourselves. We can awaken and orient our minds toward the coming Jesus, who seeks to turn us away from actions, economic choices, words, and thoughts that are destructive, hurtful, and violent. He comes to convert every ounce of our beings into instruments of peace, tools for cultivating peace gardens that germinate in our hearts and minds, and then spread life-giving seeds to our city, nation, and world.

Near the end of Fred Rogers’ life, he wrote, ‘With all the sadness and destruction, negativity and rage expressed throughout the world, it’s tough not to wonder where the loving presence is. Deep within each of us is a spark of the divine just waiting to be used up to light up a dark place.’

Our prayer is for an Advent season and a new year in which the light of Christ ignites within us the divine sparks of peace and imagination. *Amen.*