

PLAYING THE PART: ISAIAH

If you travel north to New England, and then well west of Boston to the Berkshires, at the end of Route 2 you will find an old industrial city, North Adams. And in the center of town you will find a large complex of brick buildings, factories in days gone by.

The buildings that stand there now, at the juncture of the north and south branches of the Hoosick River, were built on a site originally occupied by the Arnold Print Works, a textile mill which produced printed cloth. Among other things, the Arnold brothers had contracts to provide uniforms for the Union Army during the Civil War.

Tragedy struck in 1876, and eight of the buildings were ravaged by fire. Over time the Arnold's rebuilt them, and added others to the complex. The company grew to become the center of life for North Adams, employing over 3000 workers at its peak. But as cloth making and printing moved to the South to take advantage of lower costs, Arnold Print Works finally closed shop in 1942.

But all was not over for the venerable old buildings. The Sprague Electric Company bought them and began to make electrical equipment including capacitors. They also had a substantial research and design department, and began making the trigger mechanism for atomic bombs.

Once again, though, a change in the economy led to the exporting of electronics manufacturing and the one-time maker of parts for atomic weaponry, closed its doors in 1985.

But wait--for there's more. The next year art museum staff members from nearby Williams College fell upon the site as they hunted for a facility big enough to display very large works of art--especially modern and contemporary art. Objects too big for conventional museum spaces. And so, began the process that intine led to the purchase of the buildings, and the opening in 1999 of the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art-- what's commonly referred to now as MASS MoCA. Today it is considered one of the premiere such gallery and performing arts spaces in the country. What once was a space for creating the things of war, uniforms and parts for atomic weaponry, has become a center for art and the peaceful expression of human dreams and desires. Swords into plowshares--spears into pruning hooks. Atomic weaponry into art.

And so, we enter into the Advent season, that time in which we prepare our hearts and minds for the coming of Christ, the one we call the Prince of Peace. Each year, as we journey

through this season, we reflect on four themes, peace, hope, joy and love. And each year we are joined by various companions from the past, men and women who guide us along the path to Bethlehem. And one of those companions, year after year, is the prophet Isaiah, the one responsible for the powerful vision of peace in our first reading this morning.

We don't know a lot about Isaiah. His call to be a prophet is recorded in chapter six of the book bearing his name. It was a dramatic vision, complete with angels and bright lights. But it also pointed the way towards a career that would be marked by difficulty. It is said that his tongue was touched by a hot coal, symbolic of the way his words would set aflame the hearts of the Israelites.

Most if not all of his career was spent in Jerusalem, mostly between the years 742 and 701 BCE. Long before the united kingdom of David and his son Solomon, had split in two, Israel to the north and Jerusalem and the rest of Judah, to the south. And both tiny countries were caught at the crossroads of the ancient near east, surrounded by the might powers of Assyria, Babylon and Egypt. Powerful nations who were constantly at war with one another and their neighbors.

Judah was involved in numerous battles and diplomatic maneuverings. But Isaiah objected. When the kings of Judah looked to the larger military powers for protection, he warned against it. Like an ancient version of George Washington, who famously warned against foreign entanglements in his Farewell Address: "My ardent desire," said the outgoing first president, "and my aim has been . . . to keep the United States free from political connections with every other country; to see that they may be independent of all and under the influence of none." Isaiah felt much the same way about his own country, Judah. Avoid such alliances, he said, they only lead to death and destruction. But the kings of Judah ignored him and others. If Egypt was threatening Judah from the south, her kings turned to Assyria in the north. If Assyria was the aggressor, they turned to Babylon in the east. Again and again Isaiah warned of the dangers inherent in these military alliances, but, as well known scholar Abraham Heschel wrote: "[R]eliance on such power meant [the nation demonstrated] a belief that [human beings] rather than God, weapons, rather than attachment to [God] determined the destiny of nations." (*The Prophets*, I:71)

But the leaders of Judah refused to listen to Isaiah. They refused to understand that the road to peace is not paved with weapons and warfare. The way to peace is not paved with swords and spears.

But that's not how it all turned out. After decades and decades of trying to play both ends against the middle, after decades and decades of wars and skirmishes, time Judah was

overrun by Babylon. Its leading citizens were sent into exile, eight hundred miles away. And Jerusalem was ransacked and destroyed.

It was while in Babylon that many of the sayings and oracles of Isaiah were finally gathered together and preserved in writing. And there, now made wiser by experience, Isaiah's warning about relying on warfare and violence, began to make sense. But those words also offered up real hope--like that found in our passage this morning. A hopeful reminder that though things seemed very bleak, the day would come when swords would be beaten into plowshares, and spears into pruning hooks. The day would come when nations would no longer lift up swords in anger, nor learn of war anymore. There would be peace.

And then comes an invitation--not only in Isaiah's time--not only in the time of the exiles--but an invitation for those of us who live in our own time, those of us who live in these often-conflicted difficult days. "Walk," says Isaiah, "walk in the light of the Lord." (5b)

Here then, sisters and brothers, is the key to peace for our time as well. Here is the key not just to international peace, but peace between races, peace between men and women and those who claim no gender, peace between the young and the old, peace between all people. For ultimately all peace boils down to individual people making the choice to either love or to hate. To walk in the light, or to remain in the darkness.

I am not so naïve as to think all the world's problems can be settled on a one-to-one basis. There are systems and governments and societal structures that desperately need to be reformed. But it all starts on an individual basis. When you and I are willing to beat our own versions of swords and spears into plowshares and pruning hooks, peace will have a chance. Whether those swords and spears are literal weapons or hateful words or prejudicial thoughts.

Susan Kennedy lives in Miami Gardens, right here in Florida. And she's doing just that. Back in 2016, little six-year-old King Carter was killed by gunfire as he was walking to buy some candy at the neighborhood store. When Susan heard about it, she says she "felt like it was my child." (Craig Handel, "Donate a bullet, save a life," *The News Press*, 7-1-18, 1-A, 10A) The incident, and others like it, turned into nightmares for Susan. Literally. So, she consulted with her pastor. She wanted to do something to address the problem of violence in her city.

As she prayed about it a phrase kept entering her mind: "Donate a bullet, save a life." In time that led to her creating an organization called Bullets4Life. A group dedicated to taking bullets, dismantling them and turning them into jewelry. So, she began to walk the neighborhoods impacted the most by street violence, asking folks for their bullets. "It's one less life taken," she says, "if somebody donates bullets to me."

(Local10.com/community/2018/06/07) Today, thousands of bullets have been donated to the

cause, and hundreds of individuals have joined in the effort, turning bullets into bracelets.

Every time a bracelet is purchased, one is given to a victim of gun violence, a mother or daughter or son of someone gunned down.

Swords into plowshare. Spears into pruning hoops. Atomic weaponry into art. Bullets into bracelets.

Peace doesn't come over night. But when we walk in the light of the Lord, when we do our part to help make it a reality, peace will come. For the God we celebrate in this Advent season, is a God of Peace and Justice.

That's what Isaiah said. That's why we turn to him for guidance and strength as we work for peace. At times, it might seem like what we can do will hardly make a difference. But it can, and it does. Sherita Small, whose son Zamari was killed by a stray bullet, wears one of those bracelets. And as she says, "Every bullet you see [in a bracelet], that's a bullet that ain't ins somebody's child." (Ibid)

Amen

John H. Danner