

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Isaiah 2:1-4

Sermon Title: "The Day to End All Wars" (Armistice Day)

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94 years ago, on this very day, a treaty was signed to end World War One, or as it is known "The War to End All Wars." An alliance of about five countries signed along with Germany an armistice, an agreement to end all fighting, and thus Europe was freed from the oppression of war. Everybody could start rebuilding their lives. A national holiday was created on November 11 to celebrate the end of a war, and today we know it as Veterans Day to remember all those who have fought in all wars around the world.

So, since a treaty to end a war was signed 94 years ago from today, it would only be appropriate to look at Isaiah 2, as the prophet discusses swords beaten into plowshares and spears transformed into pruning hooks.

It seems that for about half the time I have been alive, the United States has been in the middle of some battle. If it wasn't Vietnam, then it was Desert Storm (The Gulf War). If it wasn't Desert Storm, it was the Iraq War, and then the Afghan and Pakistan Wars. As

the United State has grown in military power, we feel we need to assert ourselves on the global stage as a nation to be reckoned with. We are the great policeman with an army, navy, air force, and marine corp. to back it up. Our defense budget alone is 711 billion dollars, which is larger than the defense budgets of China, Russia, Great Britain, France, Japan, India, Saudi Arabia, and Germany, and 6 other countries combined including Canada.¹ China's defense budget is around 150 billion dollars, while Russia's is over 50 billion dollars.

So the United States is loaded for bear. And the current president has used some of that military might to kill al-Qaeda operatives and high-ranking leaders. The president has boots on the grounds to fight back any resistance and to maintain order, and he has used drones to silently strike certain targets that the soldiers cannot reach. Those who enjoy seeing the military being used effectively are called hawks, while those who do not want wars to continue are called doves. What is interesting, however, are the sharp comments that the president has received for using military force in Afghanistan and Pakistan. There are people out there who had criticized the president for being soft toward terrorists and extremists, and for not

¹ <http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/opinion-la/la-ol-ol-defense-budget-size-and-potential-for-cuts-20121023,0,6396267.story>

using drones to attack them. Yet, when the president sent in drones to kill al-Qaeda leaders, those same critics in favor of drones have now criticized the president for being too aggressive, too bloodthirsty in his approach. It doesn't matter who is in the White House, that president will never please anybody.

So the United States is loaded for bear with all the newest and strongest technology there is to wage war against combative enemies. We see how that military technology and power has kept our enemies at bay, stopping them cold in their tracks. But, we still have this passage in Isaiah 2. It is a familiar passage to some of us, especially the words, "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks, nation shall not lift up sword against nation, and neither shall they learn war anymore."²

Isaiah dreams of a day in which the mountain of the Lord's house becomes the most important place anybody wishes to behold. This mountain is Mount Zion, which exists today. The city of Jerusalem is built on Mount Zion, and in the middle of that city is the Lord's house, the temple of God. Isaiah imagines that mountain and that temple rising above all other mountains, possibly higher than Mount Everest itself.

² Isaiah 2:4.

He envisions the temple being the tallest structure in the world, taller than the Burj Khalifa in Dubai. Everybody will see the temple, and they will desire to come close to it. Isaiah says they will flow toward the Lord's house like water flowing over rocks and stream beds. Water cannot resist flowing downhill, just as everyone in the world will not be able to resist flowing uphill toward the temple of God. It is like a magnet and we are like metal.

All the nations will come to the temple, not because the temple itself is anything special. It is because of the special Person who resides there, the Lord God Almighty. The Hebrew word *El-Shaddai* means "God of the mountains," and we tend to translated *El-Shaddai* as God Almighty, since mountains are pretty powerful landforms. The Almighty God is present at the temple on his mountain, and the people of the nations see his glory and might, and like moths to the light they are drawn to the Lord.

When they arrive, Isaiah tells us that they beg the Lord to teach them his ways. They desire the Lord to show them how to walk on the paths of life. Everybody comes voluntarily.³ They choose to learn the ways of God. They want God to be not only their

³ The following ideas come from J. Alec Motyer, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: Isaiah*, 59.

Teacher but also their trusted Guide, their essential Mentor. The people choose to know how they may please God with their thoughts, words, and actions. They choose to receive and obey those things that they can never receive elsewhere. Only the Lord God Almighty may fill them up with good things such as love, peace, mercy, patience, kindness, and faithfulness.⁴

Now it might sound really boring just to sit or stand on a mountain, and listen someone teaching the people. It sounds like a classroom lecture that goes on forever and ever. We have to realize that what is going on in Isaiah 2 is transformation. The people are putting of the old ways of sin and clothing themselves with the new things of God. In the presence of the Lord, worship and fellowship and instruction for ministry are occurring. Nobody is talking about themselves, or what they hope to do to make it big. Nobody is looking to make a killing on the stock market. Nobody is showing off their new iPhone or Droid or Galaxy cellphone. Who cares if your computer tablet has a keyboard that flips front and back? Nobody is bragging about himself or herself. Nobody is talking about how they are going to exact revenge on a certain person for what he or she did. It

⁴ Cf. Galatians 5:22-23.

isn't about us or the people on that mountain. It's all about God. All focus is placed on God exclusively. No one else holds their attention so perfectly, and the people like it that way.

And they do not remain on the mountain forever. Don't think that Isaiah is describing a classroom situation, in which the lessons go on forever and ever, in which the teacher drones on about exponents and world history and grammar forever and ever. The word of the Lord has filled the bodies of God's people, and so they will go out and live how God wants them to live.

The people are transformed in Isaiah 2, and so they voluntarily choose to act out that transformation together. Again, there is no talk about making boatloads of money, or buying big houses and driving big cars, or taking expensive vacations, or becoming the most popular person on the planet. Isaiah tells us there is definitely no talk of war, whether it is between nations or between individuals. Nobody holds a grudge. Nobody is an enemy toward the other. There is no reason to have an over-inflated defense budget anymore.

Isaiah says that the people voluntarily beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning forks. We might not understand the imagery going on

here, because we don't deal with plowshares and pruning forks on a daily basis. Unless we own a farm or work a garden every week, these objects might be foreign to us. For that matter, we don't use swords or spears regularly, either. But why turn these weapons of war into something else? Why not just throw away the swords and spears, and be done with them? What Isaiah has been talking about is transformation. The people's mind and hearts and bodies can be transformed by the word of God, and so can their weapons. Those things that once destroyed lives may be turned into objects that help others.

Follow this line of reasoning: before big machinery was invented to make farming easier, people used to plant and harvest the fields by hand. Everybody got together to put the seeds in the ground, and everybody got together to reap the surplus of corn and wheat, and even peaches and peanuts. It was a big party – it was a joyful event. Everybody shared in the work together, and community was developed and strengthened. The only machines the farmers would use to plant the crops were plowshares. They were large ploughs that attached to the back of oxen, and they dug deep crevices in the ground. Pruning hooks were long poles with saw blades at one end, used especially for the pruning of trees. Once again, people

gathered together to use plowshares and pruning hooks, in order to grow food for their bodies and to sustain fellowship among themselves.

Now consider this: swords do not bring together communities. Swords destroy them. Spears are long poles that kill people at long distances. There is no contact with the people you are fighting. You keep him at a distance with the spear, and kill him far from yourself. Isaiah envisioned these weapons of war being transformed into objects for farming. That which destroys communities will be changed into objects that bring people together in joy. That which kills is going to be changed into that which brings life, life-giving food and life-giving support. The imagery is amazing, to think that people and their gear may make a 180-degree turn from evil to grace.

Imagine drones flying over Pakistan: instead of dropping bombs on people, they are beaten into forks and spoons and knives for eating, because food brings people together. Think about guns and rocket launchers cut up and hammered into tables and chair for people to sit around and talk. The materials used for Kevlar vests and uniforms are used in the construction of homes. The military technology to locate an enemy is turned into the technology to find friends and people we love, and to get together for a

time of fellowship.

This is what Isaiah is envisioning, a day in which there are no wars. There is no reason to fight another person. No reason to develop a defense budget, because there is nothing to be defensive about. People may be labeled as hawks or doves, but as God's people they find common ground in the Lord and work for him.

Soldiers are trained to fight an enemy, near or far. They are given the killer instinct to pull the trigger and take a life, if need be. However, when those soldiers come home from active duty, what do they discuss with their families? They talk about the buddies they had, those who died in battle and those who made it home alive. They talk about the honor and discipline of their units, and they glory in medals they may wear on their uniforms in a military parade. These soldiers refuse to share with their families the number of people they killed. They will not retell how they looked down the barrel of a machine gun and picked off the enemy one by one. Adult children and young grandchildren want their fathers and grandfathers to talk about the Korean War or the Vietnam War, but those old veterans will not say a thing. No matter how much their families plead, they will not talk about war. It was too much to bear. Even trained soldiers look

forward to a day in which they don't have to pick up the sword or spear and combat an enemy.

We see national security as one thing, but Isaiah sees it as another. National security is in the Lord God Almighty. Every person of every nation will soon realize that their only security is not in swords or chariots or drones or tanks, but in their Lord and God. It is our hope to strive for peace, no matter where we may be. We hope for peace amongst nations, but we always hope for peace among family members. We hope for peace in our hearts, that angry feelings and plots for revenge would be beaten down and turned into calm feelings and plans for forgiveness. We hope that we would not use double-edged words to cut people down, and we hope not to use our arms like spears to keep people at a distance. We hope to embrace everybody. We hope to use words that heal, build up, support, and encourage.

We hope for a day in which our Lord and our God will provide for us all that we will ever need, and we will learn from him, and we will obey him, and together we will live the happiest and most complete lives we could live.⁵

⁵ Frederick Buechner said, "Peace has come to mean the time when there aren't any wars or even when there aren't any major wars... But peace, *shalom*, means fullness, means having everything you need to be wholly and happily yourself" (*Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*, 83).