

What if there were no Enemy?

(ISAIAH 2:1-5 NRSV) *The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. ²In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. ³Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruc-*

tion, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. ⁴He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; 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. ⁵O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!

L: The Word of God for the people of God!

P: Thanks be to God!

I considered using a poster from the early 70s as the title for today's sermon. The poster said, "What if they gave a war, and nobody came?" But this isn't an anti-war sermon; it's broader in scope than that.

If you know me well, you know of my love of the outdoors—especially the mountains: backpacking along some ancient trail that has felt rough leather boots for a century, and soft deerskin moccasins for centuries before that. Occasionally a bear will paw along the trail, looking for berries and trout, its snout always in the air for the smell of danger—especially the danger of human presence.

To the forest animals nothing signals danger more than the smell of a human. In the forest, humans bring, not a plowshare but a sword, not a pruning hook but a spear. Man is the hunter—animals are the hunted; so, most animals don't walk the trail by day. If you want to see raccoon or a deer, you need to be out at dusk.

Night is the cover forest animals need to survive. Humans do better in the light. I don't know if Isaiah was a hunter, but he knew about light. He knew that farmers plow their fields and vinedressers tend their vineyards in the light of day. He preached eight centuries before Jesus and cried out, "Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord."

On the heels of the turbulent sixties and seventies, a frightening backlash occurred—a backlash toward fundamentalism in religion, political extremism, and macho-tough guy foreign policies. As a result, our world has moved into an increasing darkness of *polarization* in which confrontation becomes inevitable.

It's almost as if we can't function unless we have an enemy—some evil against which to rally—some "bad guy" to demonize so we can feel better about ourselves ("At least we're not as bad as they are!") In many ways, animosity has become so pervasive it seems almost normal. It's not normal. It's humanity's *fallen* nature. In my thinking, it's akin to what some theologians call "original sin."

Ethnic and religious conflicts in the Balkans, Rwanda, Chechnya, Iraq, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Darfur are just some of the best-known and deadliest exam-

ples in our lifetimes.

Antagonism in the US—conservatives and liberals—gays and straights—whites and people of color—between any two groups who disagree with each other is rapidly redefining us as a nation, and redefining Christianity as being “right” and demanding, with force if necessary, that all concur to that concept of “right”.

The roots of animosity are deep: the Book of Genesis—Cain and Abel—sons of Adam and Eve. Cain was a farmer, and Abel, a shepherd. The brothers made sacrifices to God, but God favored Abel's sacrifice instead of Cain's. In a jealous rage, Cain murdered Abel.

Abraham and his wife, Sarah, were childless; but after they were old, God promised that Abraham would be the father of many nations. Given their ages, Sarah decided God needed help to fulfill the promise; so she assigned her Egyptian slave, Hagar, to bear a son for Abraham—an acceptable practice in that culture. So, Abraham's firstborn, Ishmael was born to Hagar.

Thirteen years later, Sarah conceived and gave birth to Isaac. Later when Sarah caught Ishmael mocking Isaac, she was so upset she demanded that Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael away. Ishmael, although the firstborn, would not share in Abraham's inheritance.

And so Abraham banished Hagar and Ishmael—sent them into the wilderness with little hope of surviving. But God sent an angel to guide them; and to promise Hagar that her son, Ismael, would never be a slave as she had been.

Cut to the chase, Ishmael is considered the father of the Arabian nations, and is venerated in Islam as an important prophet. But the antagonism remains, even today, between the descendants of Isaac and Ishmael.

Isaac married Rebekah, and they had twin sons, Esau and Jacob. Esau was Isaac's favorite: a man's man—hair on his chest—a hunter. Jacob was his mother's favorite: fair of complexion and manner. Rebekah was a schemer, and she and Jacob ran a scam on Father Isaac, and cheated Esau out of his rightful blessing and inheritance. Jacob had to leave the country. It's all about inheritance, you see.

The brothers eventually were reconciled, but their descendants remained bitter enemies. Esau fathered the Edomites and settled east and south of Jacob. Later, when Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, it was the Edomites who refused them passage through their land, and the Israelites had to go farther east—up along the present-day eastern border of Jordan.

And the belligerence continued. Herod, the king who, upon hearing of the birth of Jesus, ordered the slaughter of all boy babies under the age of two, was from Idumea: a descendant of Esau. Today, the people in and around present-day Jordan continue to reflect the same hatred of Israel. And in Israel, on the West

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Bank and the Gaza Strip, the descendants of Ishmael and Esau still fight with the descendants of Isaac and Jacob over who should have received the blessings and the birthrights.

The roots are deep, the reasons long forgotten: today it's just retaliation for yesterday's shelling of a village in the Gaza Strip. But, it goes back and back and back... a demon with many names: partisanism, factionalism, Machiavellianism, "My way or the highway." Wherever it raises its ugly head and casts its evil spell—the Gaza Strip—the US Senate—the streets of Kenosha—a mall in Durham—there will be divisiveness, power struggles, and an end-justifies-the-means ethic.

It is the direct opposite of peace, love, and unity; therefore, wherever it prevails as the go-to way of getting things done, the message of Isaiah, projected through gospel of Jesus Christ is rendered impotent and helpless.

Left to ourselves, humans are more prone to the sword than the plowshare; more prone to the spear than to the pruning hook. It's true: specific response is justified when terrorists crash airliners into skyscrapers; and protective vigilance is understood. But at other times, what if there were no enemy? Could we function without one? Must we invent enemies—vilify one another because we disagree? Do we truly want the peace and justice God promises? Or do we just want to win the fight? Or do we assume: we're right; therefore, our winning the fight is the only way to attain God's peace and justice?

Today's Isaiah text is a poetic "word" Isaiah "saw"—a vision—that looked beyond his present dismay through the eyes of God *to see what will be that is not yet*. That's the function of promise in the life of faith, and it is the description of Advent: *to see what will be that is not yet*.

There is coming a time of peace, justice, and wholeness. But Isaiah doesn't know when. It is the nature of prophecy to trust the one who promises; therefore there is no need for a timetable. But that promise is the essence of Israel's hope, and the substance of the church's Advent.

During the season of Advent the church insists the Age of God already has come—brought in by one who taught that justice and peace are not the result of adversarial military or political leadership, no matter how heroic. Justice and peace—shalom—come to a people because of their sacrificial love. Justice and peace do not "Happen" unless we proactively choose them. We activate that choice—that hope—when we choose, not only to worship Jesus; but to follow him.

In Advent the church watches to see where God leads people into justice and peace and well-being. When and where that happens, the church proclaims, "Here is the Light of God! Here is Hope! Let us walk in the Light!"

Pastoral Prayer

Unexpected God, your advent catches us unaware—unprepared. Wake us from drowsy worship, from the sleepy faith that neglects love, from the sedative of misdirected frenzy.

We look for you in all the wrong places. Give us ears to hear, O God, and eyes to watch, that we may recognize your presence in our midst during this holy season of HOPE as we anticipate the coming of Jesus Christ—new and fresh—into our lives. Open us to new possibilities and abilities to see—to discern—to understand. Speak to us in unlikely places—through unlikely people: like a child in a stable, or an empty tomb.

God of justice and peace, from the heavens you thunder your Word through your prophets, calling us to mercy and kindness, pointing to those times and places when you have touched us with your own grace. Raise our heads in expectation, stir our hearts to yearn for the birth of new life in us.

Awaken us now to your coming and bend our angers into your peace, for this is our HOPE, and this is your promise, guaranteed in the one whose birth we anticipate. Amen.