

A SINGER'S IMAGINATION
Isaiah 2:1-5; Romans 12:9-18

Rev. Will Berger
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Imagine with me a war weary prophet in the midst of a war weary nation in the midst of other war weary nations. The prophet was weary of a nation who trusted in the strength of their rulers more than the strength of their God. Surrounding them were nations far more powerful than his nation or its rulers.

There were the Assyrians, who had scattered the larger northern part of his land; and so his people, the people of Judah, made their peace with Assyria. But then came the Babylonians to their East, who were to do battle with the Egyptians to their West, and there lay tiny Judah between them both, at once making peace with the one which left them under threat from the other.

In the end the Babylonians took them into exile. They had nothing left, no temple, no land, and their beautiful city of Jerusalem lay in ruins. Their only hope lay with another empire even farther to the East, Persia, which would keep a relative peace until the next empire came to conquer them with greater weapons of war.

In the end, all they had was their law, the Torah, the law of Moses, the instructions given them by their God, the Lord. And in the midst of it, they were reminded of the vision of the prophet Isaiah, the word that Isaiah, son of Amoz, saw, concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

That's what prophets do, you know, they see a word. Walter Bruggeman called it the prophetic imagination, this vision of a different world which would create an alternative consciousness which in turn would lead to an alternative community, a community that doesn't live the way the nations live, that doesn't see the world in terms of raw power and war as the nations do.

So, imagine then, if all of these war weary nations, realizing that for all of their swords and spears, and the constant effort to come up with new ways to destroy, finally determine that these weapons of war have only left us poorer, with our land ravaged, with countless refugees and orphans and widows finally saying, "maybe there's a better way."

And so they hear a voice from a mountain, ready to teach, ready to give a new law, new instruction, a new Torah, a new way of life, and they say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, that we may be taught the ways of the lord and walk in the paths of the Lord. "

And here is the vision he sees, the world he imagines, which now the nations embrace—they beat their swords into plowshares, their spears into pruning hooks. And then, finally with the weapons of war and violence set aside, and not just set aside, but finally put away forever, finally they decide not to lift up sword against each other, and never to learn war anymore.

That's an interesting thought isn't it—that war can be unlearned. It means that war is learned, giving rise to the spiritual's line "Ain't gonna study war no more." Maybe war isn't our natural state, maybe it's taught. The musical South Pacific has the then controversial song, 'You've got to be carefully taught,' which explains why people are prejudiced against people of another race. It isn't their nature, they have to be taught.

I remember as Sally and I were waiting in an airport as two children, one of Jewish parentage, the other of Arab heritage, a boy and a girl, started to play together. They played together until, you guessed it, one of the parents came over and separated them. You have to be taught to hate, don't you, you have to be taught to pick up the sword again because of past animosities. You have to be carefully taught.

But, what if we are taught differently? What if, finally realizing that our violence leads only to more violence, that bloodshed begets bloodshed, that better weapons only enable us to destroy each other more effectively--what if we finally catch a different vision, and we go to a high mountain to hear instruction from the God who stands above us all.

What if we finally listen to good sense, telling us that more guns do not make us safer, more weapons do not provide us security, and we decide to divert all of the resources we use for them instead to make swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks— instruments that heal the earth rather than the countless explosive devices which leave the land barren.

Wouldn't you rather have that world? It's what the prophet imagines for us, the world as it is meant to be. It is the vision we read in our scripture this morning. The prophet says a day is coming in which all the nations of the world will cease their fighting and come to worship God together. In this redeemed world community, God's teaching will settle any disputes and make sure that justice and righteousness prevail.

This is how we will know that war has truly come to an end: when weapons are turned into farming tools: "swords into plowshares, spears into pruning hooks" and then, they won't learn war anymore. That's the word that he sees, that's the vision that he beholds. And in his wonderfully poetic and prophetic way, that's the song that he sings.

My favorite World War II song of peace is Dame Vera Lynn's "There'll be bluebirds over the White Cliffs of Dover." It looked toward a time when the war would end and peace would rule over the beautiful white cliffs which formed the closest border with Europe and was the place where British and German aircraft fought over.

Bluebirds aren't indigenous there, but that's part of the musical imagination that poets and prophets have, hoping for the day, says the song, when "there'll be bluebirds over the white cliffs of dover tomorrow, just you wait and see. There'll be love and laughter and

peace ever after tomorrow when the world is free.”

That’s what prophet's songs give us--hope, vision, and the desire to bring about what we can imagine. And it is imagination, you know, it’s not fantasy--there's a difference. The prophet proclaims a real world, our world, a world when our investments are not in weapons but in tools to heal the earth, a world when our investments are not in declaring war, but in teaching peace.

I don’t care to get much around end of the world talk, not just because it is wrong, and it is, but because it is world denying and hopeless, which the gospel is anything but. God loved the world, says the scripture. These prophets of doom ignore the prophet’s vision, they believe any effort to improve or reform the world is a waste of time, a major distraction. They see war and violence as the necessary and inevitable precursor to the final End.

We have to stand against that vision, you and I. We have to make it clear that it is not the prophet’s vision, it is not God's vision, it is not our vision. We’ve got to keep imagination alive, you and I, we’ve got to keep this vision of what should be, maybe even what can be, alive. That’s what we have to do, what the prophet would have us do, to keep that vision alive.

So we are left with this song of peace, to sing it, to see it. We can continue on our path of destruction, or we can catch the vision, and sing the song, and maybe someday, what we sing about will be real, and the vision will be realized. It may be only a beginning, but that’s what Christmas is about, God entering life into a wartorn area as a newborn child, as the prince of peace.

Almost every great movement for change in history was sustained by its songs. Martin Luther King Jr. had a vision, and he preached it, but more than that, they sang it--We shall overcome, they sang. Soon and Very Soon, we are going to see the King, they sang, no more crying, no more dying, soon and very soon...

Melissa Early is a pastor who serves a church in a Chicago suburb that is engaged in their community working for peace and justice. It's a diverse congregation in many ways. The recent election brought some of the church's members discouragement, others encouragement. And they wondered how to respond.

In the Sunday sermon following the election, she said, "I told my small reconciling United Methodist Church in an affluent suburb of Chicago that we would keep doing what we had been doing — “We are called to follow where Jesus leads. To feed the hungry. To clothe the naked. To give water to those who thirst. To protect the vulnerable. To lift up the dignity of every person.” (*Journey with Jesus*, Lectionary Essay, "Wake Up, 11/2016)

Let's keep doing what we've been doing. Whoever we are, wherever we are, in time of peace or conflict, in time of joy or sorrow, let's keep singing the song. It's not easy work, but it's worthwhile work, and nothing given to making our world less violent and more whole is ever lost. It is the prophet's vision, it is God's vision. And it can be our vision, too, can it not, as we live for it and hope for it--and sing about it.

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