

SCRIPTURE TEXT: Isaiah 2:1-5

SERMON TITLE: Signs & Visions: Swords Into Plowshares

I hate war. War brings so much death--so much destruction--so many maimed, physically, emotionally, spiritually. War is hell. Soldiers who have been in combat know exactly I'm talking about. Eugene Sledge was a veteran of the 1st Marine Division in World War II. He fought the Japanese on Peleliu and Okinawa. After the war, he wrote a book called *With the Old Breed*. It's the most graphic and disturbing account of combat that I've ever read--and I've read a lot.

In his book, Sledge described a combat experience he had on Okinawa: *We were in the depths of the abyss....Men struggled and fought and bled in an environment so degrading I believed we had been flung into hell's own cesspool.* (Sledge, Eugene. *With the Old Breed: At Pelelieu and Okinawa*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.) Experiences like this in combat, changed him. He once said in an interview: *After awhile the veneer of civilization wore pretty thin....It was so savage. We were savages.* (Terkel, Studs. *The Good War*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1984, pages 58, 59.) War is hell.

And war is a nightmare that, for many veterans, continues to haunt them many years after the fact. As some you know, I worked on the staff of the Admiral Nimitz Museum in Fredericksburg for five years. I can't tell you how many times I saw elderly men 50 or 60 years after their service in World War II, weep openly as they remembered their experiences in combat and especially, when they remembered their buddies that never made it back. These memories were seared into their souls for a lifetime.

And some of them wrote of their actual nightmares. For example, there was Hap Halloran, a navigator and bombardier on a B-29 bomber that was shot down over Japan in January of 1945. Hap became a prisoner of the Japanese and he endured unspeakable horrors that I won't describe for you this morning. And the horror of his captivity didn't end with his liberation and return home. Hap wrote: *I was O.K. most of the time but the nights were bad. I broke windows, and did a lot of dumb things, like running out in the streets screaming. That*

terrified my wife and children.

I had horrible nightmares. I dreamed I was falling through space and was trying to reach out for something. I saw fires all around me, and people beating me. I'd crawl in closets and under the bed to get away from what was happening to me. I didn't talk much about it. I thought it was my problem to solve. (Halloran, Hap and Marshall, Chester. *Hap's War*.)

War is a nightmare. War is hell. I hate war. But I also have undying respect for those who endure the horrors of combat because they do it for one another and for us--and I'm grateful. But it's also because of them and all the others who suffer in war, that I also long for peace. Don't we all long for peace?

Well, we're not alone. God longs for peace. In fact, God's dream for us is peace. Isaiah saw it. The word of the Lord came to him in a vision. He saw Mt. Zion in Jerusalem—the site of the Temple--the dwelling place of God on earth—raised up above every other mountain. He saw people from all nations streaming to Zion, to be taught God's ways so that they might walk in God's paths. He saw God's Torah--God's teaching--God's word--flowing out from Zion into the world producing peace: Swords into plowshares. Spears into pruning hooks. No more war. Only God's righteous judgments settling disputes among nations and peoples. No need to learn war anymore.

Now if Isaiah is right and peace is God's dream for us, then war must be God's worst nightmare. And we may find this confusing given the violence and bloodshed so evident in the pages of scripture and understood to be sanctioned by God. But the vision is still there. God's dream for peace is proclaimed in the very midst of the stories of death and destruction. In fact, this vision is more than a dream, it's a promise. Peace is promised! The day will come. Peace will come.

And the day has already dawned in Jesus Christ. We have found the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy in him: *For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, the*

mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:6) And do you remember what the angels sang at his birth? *Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.* (Luke 2:14) The day has dawned! The dream lives on! The promise is being kept. Jesus is the judge. Jesus is the teacher. Jesus is the sign.

And since we follow Jesus, we're called to be a sign of God's dream for peace. Even though swords are still swords and not plowshares--even though spears are still spears and not pruning hooks--even though nation still lifts up sword against nation--even though war is still included in the curriculum--the church's vocation is to keep the dream alive!

But even more than that, we're called to lead the way toward peace. Notice this: The fulfillment of God's dream is promised for the future with the nations streaming to Zion and there learning to live in peace. *In days to come*, the text says. But look at verse 5 in chapter 2: *O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!* This is language of the present. And it applies to us. Through Jesus Christ we've been included in the house of Jacob; therefore we are called to live the vision now--to lead the nations toward peace. We're not to wait until the nations change--we're to lead the nations. We're to be peacemakers in a world addicted to war--even if it requires taking up a cross.

So what specifically does this mean for us? Well, I'm not going to answer that question this morning. I want us instead to spend the season of Advent--a season of self-examination and repentance--wrestling with God's dream for us and with this question. I encourage us all to put aside our old answers and to look at the issue anew, holding fast to our longings for peace, while keeping our focus on Jesus Christ and his way of peace among us. My aim this morning is simply to get us pointed in the right direction--which reminds me of a story.

A former British prime minister named Ramsey MacDonald was once criticized for being hopelessly idealistic about peace. One of his critics once said to him, *The desire for peace does*

not necessarily ensure it. Mr. MacDonald said, Quite true. But neither does the desire for food satisfy your hunger, but at least it gets you started toward a restaurant. (Hewitt, James S., editor. *Illustrations Unlimited*. Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1988, p. 403.)

My brothers and sisters, God has a dream for us. It's not a hell on earth; it's not a nightmare; but it's peace.