

Lake Shore Baptist Church

Sermon 12/01/2019

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Text: Isaiah 2:1-5

Title: Making Something Out of Something

Comments of welcome, gratitude, introduction, etc.

Prayer... “may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts together be found acceptable in your sight, O God, our rock and our redeemer.”

Happy New Year! This is the first Sunday of the Christian calendar. I’ve come to the Christian calendar and the Revised Common Lectionary late in life. It wasn’t a part of my upbringing or even my early adult life. So, the rhythms of the church year are still fresh and something new for me. For most of my adult life, as an academic, I lived on the academic calendar. I know that’s true for a lot of our Lake Shore folks this morning. And all of us are influenced by the calendar that starts in January – at least those of us that pay income taxes....[grin].

So, let me say “Happy New Year!” And we’ll celebrate again come January 1. Many of us here this morning will have a new beginning come August as a new academic year begins.

It seems appropriate that we people of Jesus who celebrate redemption and second chances would have as many “Happy New Year’s” as possible. After all, we’re all about new beginnings. Starting over with a fresh slate is our mantra.

So, today we start a new Christian year. A new year full of possibilities, full of potential, full of new opportunities. A new year full of hope for a brighter future. A new year with the possibility of transformation. A new year with a chance to start over yet again. One of the things I miss about life as an academic is that chance

to start over again every semester. As a student, a new chance to reach that GPA I wanted. As a faculty member, a new chance to try out a new syllabus with a new group of students. We all like a chance to try again.

If there was ever a group that might have wanted a chance to start over, it was the people of Judah and their King Ahaz. Today's text from Isaiah are Isaiah's words to that king and his people. At this point in time, the City of Jerusalem is under siege. Armies and swords and death and destruction literally surround them. All of that is joined by doubt, fear, anxiety, and apprehension.

Their very existence as a nation is in doubt. Along with their faith in a God they've depended on to protect them. A God who brought their nation into existence, a God who protected them from their enemies, a God who brought the glory days of King Solomon and made them what they considered themselves to be: a favored nation.

But the king has run out of options and has called in the prophet Isaiah for advice and counsel. I wonder what Ahaz thought of Isaiah's counsel?

Isaiah says God will be a great and mighty and respected judge. That all the nations will come to God. Then he says this about all the nations: "they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks."

I can hear Ahaz's response: Ok, Isaiah. Are you sure you heard the word of the LORD? Do you need to check your connection? Did you drive out of range of the nearest cell phone tower? Are you sure your email wasn't hacked?

Swords into plowshares? Spears into pruning hooks?

At the United Nations building in New York City, there's a famous sculpture of a very muscled man holding a blacksmith's hammer in mid-stroke. The object of his work is a piece of metal that he holds in his hand. The end that he holds is the handle of a sword. The other end is the blade of a plow piercing the ground at his feet. Anyone who knows this Scripture passage knows exactly what the man is doing and can see that the work is hard, but possible.

My dad was a World War II veteran. He served overseas in the Army Air Corps. When he died a few years ago my brother and I were going through his things preparing to move my mother into assisted living. My dad had several guns. He wasn't a gun nut and didn't get involved in political discussions about guns. He just grew up hunting and liked to shoot. My brother took most of my dad's guns, but there was one that I wanted. It was an Army surplus M-1 Carbine that he bought from the government after the war. When he bought it, the wooden stock was unfinished and my great-uncle Harry, who was a talented wood worker, sanded, stained, and sealed the stock for dad. So, the gun reminds me of both my dad and my great-uncle.

When I got the gun, I began to do some research. I wanted to learn about why it was designed the way it was, where it was made, things like that. When I did that research, I uncovered some interesting facts.

During World War II, M-1 Carbines were manufactured by the Winchester company, a gun maker, but they were also made in massive quantities by:

Inland Manufacturing, a division of General Motors
Underwood Elliott-Fisher, a typewriter maker
IBM, International Business Machines

Standard Products, who made gas caps and other auto parts. They were also made by Rock-Ola, a juke-box maker and the National Postal Meter Company.

This aroused my curiosity and I dug a little deeper. I learned that Chrysler, Ford, and General Motors all made tanks. On February 22, 1942 all manufacturing of automobiles was stopped in this country and those production lines were converted to the war effort.

In less than three months, we stopped making plowshares and converted our efforts to making swords.

The war ended in August, 1945, but it took until the 1948 and 1949 model years before there were any new car designs available to American consumers. Converting to a peacetime economy took a lot longer than converting to a war footing. It took us a lot longer to beat our swords into plowshares.

Isaiah tells Ahaz that God will beat swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. I wonder how much comfort Ahaz found in those words? With his adversaries right outside the gates of Jerusalem, waiting for the word to attack?

Isaiah is, of course, talking about how God will someday change the world itself. The entire Bible is about transformation. God turns fear into comfort, hate into love, anxiety into faith, and war into peace. Yet, even now it seems easy to doubt that God is really up to that kind of transformation.

We live in a world not unlike that of Ahaz. We seem surrounded on all sides by adversaries. The messages of division are all around us. And I'm not just talking about Bears versus Sooners or Horns versus Aggies.

We live in culture divided by the media, divided by politics, divided by rich and poor, white and black, LGBTQ and cisgender, Red and Blue, Us and Them.

We live surrounded by adversaries of doubt, of hate, of division, of chaos. How are we to navigate this crazy world?

Isaiah says there is one to come that brings hope, that will turn our swords into plowshares, our spears into pruning hooks.

Did you notice the specifics of what God does with the swords? God doesn't just bury those hatchets. God doesn't just destroy the implements of war. God transforms them. God redeems them. He turns instruments of war into instruments of agriculture. What was once meant for harm will now be used for feeding, for sustaining, for thriving.

If Advent is about anything, it's about recognizing and preparing for the transformation of the world to come. It's about getting our spirits ready for what God's gonna do. What God's gonna do in the world and what God's gonna do in human hearts the world over.

So, what does all this mean for us? How can God use us to change swords into plowshares? Does God want us to demonstrate at nuclear weapons weapons facilities? Does he want us holding signs at the nearest military base? Who am I to say that God's not calling you to do that? But I have something both closer to home and, shall I say, maybe even more powerful and certainly more subversive of our current cultural expectations.

If God is in the business of changing the world one human heart at a time, what about this?

How many of you had a difficult time with your family last Thursday? Anybody here struggle with political discussions? Are family gatherings difficult because of the divisiveness of our current culture? How about your social media? Do your Facebook or your Twitter feeds somehow become a place of ugly contention?

Have your words and the words of others turned sometimes into swords of contention?

How might you turn those words into plowshares? How might you transform those words into words of comfort and support, words that lift up instead of tear down? What might God be saying to us about how we use our words?

A few years ago someone had the vision to develop what became a very popular way of helping folks, especially in the third world. Aid services discovered that a small amount of money, loaned to motivated individuals, could do much good in many parts of the world. Micro-lending spread across the third world and in 2018 there were over 240 million micro-borrowers worldwide. Micro-lending sought to change the world one person at a time.

What if we worked to change the world – one conversation at a time? What if, with the transformation of conversation after conversation, we could locally redeem words from their use as swords and re-task them for productive use – as plowshares?

Proverbs says, “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”

Moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt talks about the moral humility of stepping outside of our own views and seeking to understand the views of others. Without going into an entire lecture that I’m not in any way qualified to give, let me just say that both

psychologists and neuro-biologists have shown us that the way to bring people together is not to argue each other into submission, but to bring each other into community. I love to hear all the many examples of how Scripture and science are telling us the same things. What both Scripture and science are telling us here is that in effect, we have to love each other into understanding. And that, indeed, takes a large dose of humility and a ton of understanding. It requires us to step out of our preconceptions and build up our own ability to empathize.

If you'd like evidence of what I'm describing, I present to you as Exhibit A, Fred Rogers, known the world over as simply Mr. Rogers.

I'm sure we all know who Fred Rogers was, but for the sake of the sermon, let me give a short bio. Fred Rogers was a children's television actor, puppeteer, musician, and producer from Pittsburgh. When I Googled the word "Fred," the first option was "Fred Rogers."

Mr. Roger's Neighborhood aired on public television for 33 years, during which time Fred Rogers revolutionized children's television in the way the program approached the social and emotional needs of children. It was said that Rogers was "that unique television star with a real spiritual life", emphasizing the values of patience, reflection, and "silence in a noisy world."

What Fred Rogers never talked about directly, but lived thoroughly, was his faith in Christ. He was an ordained Presbyterian minister who saw children's television as his calling and his ministry. He certainly lived out that calling.

If you're curious about Fred Rogers, check out the documentaries about him online and/or go see the movie, "A Beautiful Day in the

Neighborhood.” I wouldn’t normally do commercials in the pulpit, but this is one incredible movie.

Fred Rogers took words and redeemed them from the culture. He used them to heal, not wound. We can do the same. We can transform the world one conversation at a time and, if I might be so bold: Isn’t that our calling? As we prepare for Advent, aren’t we called to help others prepare as well? With our words of healing and deeds of service, we not only prepare ourselves for the coming Messiah, but we are God’s agents helping others do the same.

Looking back over your Thanksgiving with relatives and friends, thinking over your social media, or even just your conversations every day.... How might you turn your own swords into plowshares this Advent season?

During Advent, we claim the hope of the one to come. One way we claim that hope is to live the hope of the one to come. Hope for a world transformed. Hope that we can participate in that transformation as God redeems the world not only through the coming Messiah, but also through us who claim that Messiah as our own.

May it be so. Amen