

Living Towards Peace

a sermon by Brett Younger

text: Isaiah 11:1-9

We are the products of our hopes and dreams. We are drawn toward what we think our lives should be. Small dreams are always tempting us, but trivial dreams lead to trivial lives that give only lip service to a trivial God. We can dream of a promotion and a bigger house or we can dream of a better world.

The prophet Isaiah dreamed big. He dreamed of a new day for all creation. Out of Israel, out of the stump, a shoot will emerge, from the roots of a fallen tree fruit will grow. God will come in the Spirit of peace and create a world where the poor are treated with kindness.

Isaiah could have said it in prose rather than poetry, as in: "God's people are having a rough time, but one day God will make it right." But instead the prophet paints this unforgettable picture—wolves and lambs, leopards and goats, calves and lions, all sharing the same pasture, living in peace. God will reorder, rearrange, and heal all of the divisions. Isaiah dreamed of a day so free

tween meals." Politicians too soon start posturing again. They randomly choose places for confrontation. They try to look unyielding, afraid that any sign of concern will be interpreted as weakness. They promise not to negotiate as though listening could be a mistake.

They talk about national pride as if pride is a good enough reason for a war. They point fingers like children on the playground: "It's your fault." "No, it's your fault." They argue, "We're running out of time" without recognizing that makes no sense. Very few politicians work for peace. The tide moves in the other direction. Every time a president declares war his popularity skyrockets. Violence is far more popular than peace.

Our local paper ran a story entitled "War Games Fever" about a local paintball outlet where players dress up in camouflage and shoot one another. Eight- and nine-year-olds are quoted saying, "The best part is shooting people." An adult explains, "Nothing is more exciting than shooting another person." The line that bothered me the most was when the owner suggested that shooting one another is an ideal outing for church groups. Do church people really do that? That ought to disturb us, but not many eyebrows are raised.

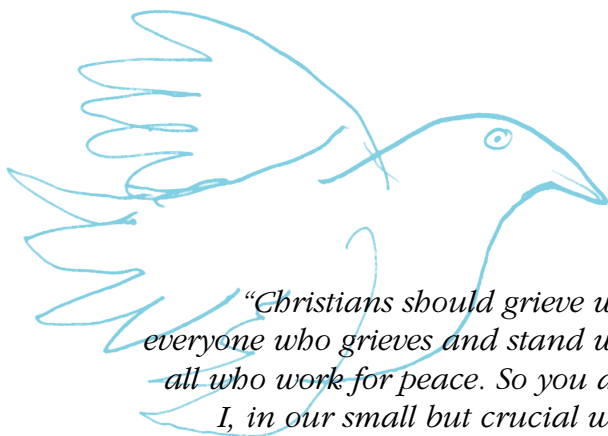
John Kennedy said, "We'll keep having wars until the conscientious objector enjoys the same prestige as the warrior." The warriors get more applause than the peacemakers.

The ignored truth is that war is unreasonable. When the first atomic bomb was dropped on Japan, President Truman was on board a Navy ship, returning from a conference of the Allies. Someone handed him a note that informed him of the successful drop of the bomb. He turned to a group of soldiers and said, "This is the greatest news in the history of the world." Down through the ages lots of world leaders have believed that they were changing the course of the world, when they were only taking their place in the long processional of violence and death.

The world's long history of waging war makes it clear that war doesn't work. The people who believe in war are being unreasonable. Every generation since Isaiah has been told a strong military is the best guarantee of peace, so they have built spears and swords and missiles and warheads. Has it worked? During the last 3,350 years, the world has seen about 227 years of peace.

In the last four hundred years there have been more than 8,000 peace treaties—all intended to last forever. They last, according to historian J.T. Ford, an average of two years. "If there's anything we learn from history it's that we learn nothing from history," Benjamin Mays said. There is no war to end all wars.

General Dwight Eisenhower once told his troops, "Don't needlessly endanger your lives until I give you the signal." People keep dying needlessly. During the U.S. Gulf War of the 1990s, a senior Pentagon official was asked why the military censored footage showing Iraqi soldiers being sliced in two by helicopter gunfire. He responded, "If we let people see that kind of thing, there would never be any more wars." As Benjamin Franklin would say, "There's never been a good war or



"Christians should grieve with everyone who grieves and stand with all who work for peace. So you and I, in our small but crucial way, should give ourselves to peace at every level. Maybe we accept war on an international scale because we know we're capable of similar foolishness on an individual scale."

from fear that a baby will crawl over the cobra's hole and a little child will play in the snakes' den as though it were a doll house.

Isaiah's dream seems unrealistic—to say the least. We read "the wolf will lie down with the lamb" and expect the next line to be, "but the lamb won't get much sleep and will disappear the next day during breakfast."

It's hard to take such an idyllic vision seriously. If Isaiah believes that armies will be dismantled, missile installations turned into grain elevators, and defense budgets cut to feed hungry children, then he must have lived in a heavy fog.

War is considered far more practical than peace. In the absence of war, people like to say they are for peace, but it never lasts. As Coman McCarthy said, "Everybody's a pacifist between wars. It's like being a vegetarian be-

a bad peace.”

And yet we keep spending our money on weapons that will never do what they promise. We pay more and more taxes. Our military gets stronger. We fight war after war—five in this country, in this century. In the name of peace nations build nuclear warheads—each of them more destructive than the bomb that devastated Hiroshima. Our country has more than enough weapons to destroy the whole world. Yet we keep building bombs.

According to the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America, our country’s military budget is five times that of Japan, the next largest power, ten times that of Russia, seventeen times the combined budgets of the nations identified by the U.S. Pentagon as potential adversaries, more than the combined military budgets for all other nations, and—maybe most surprisingly—more than the Pentagon asks for.

It doesn’t take a prophet to see that building more bombs makes the world more dangerous. It may be that the probability of war increases with the effectiveness of our weapons.

The stakes have never been higher. In the eighth century BCE, soldiers died just as dead as they do now. Parents’ tears ran just as bitterly. The cries of the wounded were just as agonizing. Politicians depended on spears and swords then just as they depend on missiles and warships today.

Still, the stakes are higher now. We try to forget that we still live under the shadow of a mushroom cloud. Thomas Merton wrote this about our addiction to war: “The human race today is like an alcoholic who knows that drinking will destroy him and yet always has good reasons why he must continue to drink.”

We have unthinkable power to destroy. Our weapons are unbelievably destructive. So who is more realistic, those who believe in war or those who believe in peace? People of good will have different ideas about how to achieve peace, so sometimes we’re reticent to talk about it. We should be able to agree, however, on our abhorrence of war and our need to work together for peace.

Jesus’ blessing of the peacemakers—those who live for the day Isaiah dreamed—is central to the Gospel. Jesus said something like, “You have heard it said ‘Love your country and hate its enemies,’ but I say to you ‘Love and pray for the Iraqis.’”

Christians should grieve with everyone who grieves and stand with all who work for peace. So you and I, in our small but crucial way, should give ourselves to peace at every level. Maybe we accept war on an international scale because we know we’re capable of similar foolishness on an individual scale.

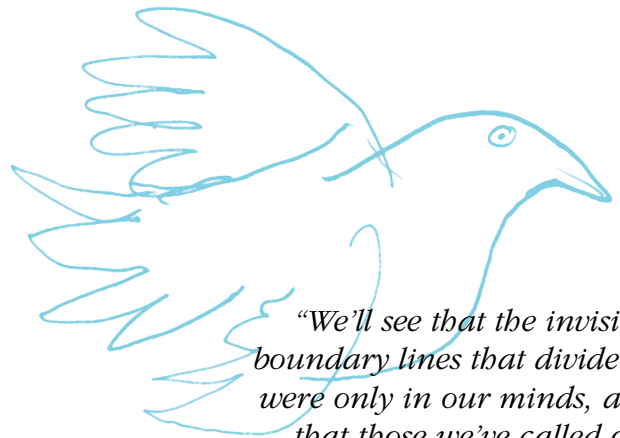
We should stop misdirecting our anger to bolster our own self-esteem; stop criticizing long enough to offer words of reconciliation; be more willing to extend forgiveness and less willing to think the worst of others. We should love our enemies and pray that they will live long, good lives, beat our own swords into plowshares and our own spears into pruning hooks, and no longer wage war with our neighbor across the street or across the ocean.

We have to push for peace, because there are no statistics that apply to Christians—only sisters and brothers. In his book *Christianity Rediscovered*, Vincent Donovan tells of being a missionary with the Masai people in Kenya. One of the most significant gestures for the Masai is to offer one another a handful of grass

as a sign of peace.

When arguments arise, one Masai will hold out a tuft of grass. If the other accepts it, it’s the assurance that no violence will erupt because of the argument. Donovan says, “No Masai would violate that sacred sign of peace, because it’s not only a sign of peace; it is peace.”

Shouldn’t Christians be able to say “The peace of Christ be with you” and see it as a promise that we won’t kill one another? Have you ever stopped to think that if



“We’ll see that the invisible boundary lines that divide us were only in our minds, and that those we’ve called our enemies are also God’s children. One day nations won’t wage war any more.”

Christians just refused to kill other Christians, most wars would never begin? Peace can become something we wish for, something we make, something we do, something we give and something for which we live.

We live towards God’s hope. God’s promise is not that there will be worldwide peace in our time. The hope is for the extravagant gift of God’s peace.

George Lansbury worked hard for peace in England. He lived through World War I and died just after World War II. To most it would seem that he had struggled for forty years for nothing. Just before Lansbury died, a friend asked him how much nearer he thought peace was after his forty years of peacemaking. Lansbury answered, “Forty years nearer.”

One day all of those in charge of the old world—the generals, politicians, and priests who profit from the present order—are going to be displaced and God will rule. One day you’ll look at the parent you never understood and understand. Even more miraculously, they’ll look at us and understand. Palestinians and Israelis, Serbs and Moslems, Tutsies and Hutus, Catholics and Protestants, Chinese and Tibetans, liberals and conservatives, rich and poor, black and white, male and female, old and young will celebrate God’s grace together. One day the church will be completely sold out to God’s vision of peace.

We’ll see that the invisible boundary lines that divide us were only in our minds, and that those we’ve called our enemies are also God’s children. One day nations won’t wage war any more.

—Brett Younger is a pastor in Fort Worth, Texas. He says that this has not been one of his more popular sermons.

art by Catriona McGlashan Long