

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of  
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**  
*Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on December 1, 2019 (I Advent)*

“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 anymore.”

Beautiful, well-known words from the prophet Isaiah. Words that offer a vision of possibility and hope. Words that evoke peace and the prospect of harmony. The vivid image of instruments of war being hammered into implements of peace is arresting.

Outside the United Nations stands a large bronze sculpture titled “Let Us Beat Our Swords Into Plowshares” by a Russian artist. It was presented to the UN in 1959 by the Soviet Union at the very height of the Cold War. If you haven’t seen it, the sculpture depicts the figure of a man holding a hammer aloft in one hand and a bent sword in the other, which he is beating into a plowshare. Geopolitics aside, it is a stunning portrayal of the Biblical imagery.

Of course, for the realists among us, Isaiah’s words come across as fanciful at best. Nice imagery, but not exactly rooted in reality. After all, just turn on the news! Open a newspaper! Violence and war and destruction are all around us. If anything, plowshares have been beaten into *swords*; pruning hooks have been turned into *spears*; nation continues to lift up sword against nation; and in every corner of the earth, war is being waged.

But the beauty of Isaiah’s vision, is that he can’t be just shrugged off as some naïve peacenik. The prophet is well-versed in the world’s reality. We just heard a portion from chapter two, but listen to what he describes in chapter one of the book that bears his name: “Your country lies desolate, your cities are burned with fire... They do not defend the orphan, and the widow’s cause does not come before them.”

Isaiah’s eyes are wide open to the world’s violence and injustice; this is no sheltered, rose-colored existence. Which only makes God’s vision of peace and wholeness all the more powerful. The dramatic image of turning swords into plowshares, stands in stark relief to the injustice and destruction that defines so much of the human condition. And again, artists have long sought to capture this spirit of hope in the midst of alienation and despair.

In 2007, the artist Pedro Reyes was invited to the Mexican city of Culiacán in the Northwestern part of the country. At the time, Culiacán was one of the most notorious drug trafficking centers in Mexico and one of the most violent cities in the entire world. Rampant gun violence was tearing at the very fabric of the city and its inhabitants.

Reyes came to Culiacán to launch a campaign where residents were asked to donate guns that were subsequently melted down and made into shovels. The Biblical symbolism was powerful, as they quite literally beat swords into plowshares. And so was the witness to peace in a city so accustomed to violence.

In the end, Reyes and his team received 1,527 guns. In a public demonstration, they flattened them with a steamroller. And then, after converting these instruments of killing into garden tools, they then used the shovels to plant a corresponding number of trees in Culiacán and around the

world. In fact, a few years ago, Reyes came to Boston and used one of these shovels to plant a tree at the Arnold Arboretum in Jamaica Plain, highlighting our own city's struggle with gun violence.

What I love about this whole story, is the Biblical imagery of Isaiah's vision come to life in a very real way. Of course, violence remains a prominent feature of modern life — in Culiacán where drug cartels continue to wreak havoc, and all over the world. Again, just turn on the local or national news. But Reyes' Culiacán project was and is a clear and visible sign of the in-breaking of God's kingdom, right into the heart of the world's harshest realities.

Which bring us to the season of Advent. If you come to church and listen to the readings and pay attention to the words that accompany the hymns and pray the seasonal prayers, you'll notice that Advent is about so much more than hauling Christmas decorations down from the attic. It may well be that too. But Advent is a season not just for getting the house ready for the holidays, but one that prepares us for both the *first* coming of Jesus 25 days from now, and the *second* coming of our resurrected Lord at the end of the age.

And it is that second piece, the anticipated return of Jesus that offers us hope that one day there truly will be no more war, or violence, between and among people. But in the meantime, we must reconcile what it means to live in in-between times. Because that's our reality as Christians living in the 21st century. We live between "the already" of our salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, and the "not yet" of waiting for the full realization of God's kingdom. We live between the arrival of the baby Jesus in a manger, and the return of the risen Christ in all his glory.

So how do we do that? How do we live authentic and faithful lives as we wait for God's kingdom to be fully realized on earth as it is in heaven? One method might be to just bide our time, stick our heads in the sand, and ignore the injustices and disparities that characterize the human existence in this in-between time. To just throw up our hands and decide that anything we do to bring justice to the world is but a tiny drop in a giant bucket of oozing cruelty.

You may not be surprised to learn that I don't suggest taking this approach. Our place, I firmly believe, is to play an active role in helping to bring about God's reign right here on earth. And we do this by any number of small but Christ-centered acts. By reaching out our hands in love to the least, the lonely, and the lost. By being generous and kind and loving in our interactions with others. By rejecting violence in the name of peace.

You *can* beat the swords of destruction that each one of us wields, into tools of harmony. You hold that hammer in your hand. And the question is whether you will drop it in favor of the sword, or use it to beat that sword into an instrument of peace. Will we work as co-laborers with Christ to enable God's reign in our midst? Or will we passively work against it by failing to use that hammer to fashion implements of peace and justice?

Those are the questions I invite you to wrestle with this Advent. Because if we believe that God's reign leads to abundance and joy and hope and peace — all those things we talk about at Christmas — that's what we must forge during this season of preparation. In our own hearts and in the lives of all whom we encounter.