

Advent 1, Year C
Isaiah 2: 1-5
Dec. 2, 2007

Trinity Episcopal Church
Sonoma, California

Living Into Advent:
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

Today we mark the beginning of Advent—a season that reminds us not only that Christ has come, but also that Christ is coming and will come again and again and again. Advent is a time of the already and a time of the not yet—already God has come into our life and into our world, already God’s reign of shalom has begun. And yet we are so far from God’s shalom—so far from that reign of justice and peace for which we so fervently long, so far from that day when swords are turned into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks and peace reigns in the land.

How then do we live in this land in-between? How do we live in the long Advent of our lives? How do we live in that wide gap between the reality we see around us and our hope for God’s reign on earth?

The prophets struggled with such questions as they looked out on their world. Today we hear the words of the prophet Isaiah speaking to a people who lived in darkness, a people whose land had been trampled, whose lives had been turned upside down, a people who played a part in creating their own darkness. The folks Isaiah spoke to had decided to take what they could get, to survive any way they could. They cut corners, they looked the other way, they turned from acts of mercy and the ways of justice. Widows and orphans were left to fend for themselves. And yet we hear Isaiah paint a picture of hope as he says about the nations and peoples who turn to God, “they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” He then addresses his people saying, “Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord.”

I wonder how they responded to his words. Did they raise their eyebrows? Shake their heads? Mutter to themselves about that crazy dreamer Isaiah? I bet the cynics among them said, “Yeah. Right.” and then went on with their old corrupt ways. There must have been others who truly yearned for peace but found the task of beating swords into ploughshares simply overwhelming.

What about us—how do we hear these words? Do we hear them and think to ourselves, “If only....If only we could beat swords into ploughshares. If only we could stop learning war.” Do we shake our heads and say to ourselves, “Not in our day. Not now—in this time of war in Iraq and Afghanistan; not now in this

time of frightening instability in Pakistan; not now with the saber rattling over Iran; not now – not as we enter the seventh decade of conflict between Israel and Palestine; not now – not with the genocide going on in Darfur. Surely not now.”

It’s tempting to listen to these words about turning swords into ploughshares and put them into some distant time – a not-yet kind of time. It’s tempting to hear these words as a kind of distant hope removed from the reality of our daily life.

But Advent – that season of already and not yet – calls on us to hear these words in a different way. Advent calls on us to hear these words and ask how can we live into this hope for God’s shalom to come on earth now today. Advent asks us to consider how we – as individuals, as a community, as a country and a world live in this in-between time. How do we beat our swords into ploughshares and our spears into pruning hooks?

One step is to recognize that God’s promise of shalom – of peace anchored by the pillars of justice and loving kindness – is not a distant promise – it’s a promise for the here and now, the in-breaking of God’s reign in this moment. Remember the many times Jesus says, “The kingdom of God has come near”.

But we must do more than simply wait for the moments when God’s reign bursts forth in our lives. We are the ones called to beat our swords into ploughshares and our spears into pruning hooks. It’s ours to do the work of turning from war to peace. It’s ours to begin living into God’s promise of shalom. We can do that – we can take little steps. We can start learning and living the ways of peace and justice. We can start living into God’s shalom.

The work of turning swords into ploughshares often consists of little things that point us to peace and the justice and loving kindness that are part of God’s shalom – living according to the notion that we are all connected and that an injustice to one is an injustice to all; holding fast to a commitment to thinking and speaking the language of peace; being determined to root out the language of war from our vocabulary – words like target, combat, explode; refusing to turn people into objects by labeling them for labeling people makes it easier to do violence to them in any one of a number of ways. But there’s more to this work – there’s the work of remembering--remembering the moments when God has been born in us; remembering how it feels to receive and to give God’s reconciling love – how it feels to see new possibilities in the moment; how it feels to renew the ties that bind us to one another.

If one step is recognizing the immediacy of it all, perhaps another step is one of recognition as well – the recognition that this work of turning swords into

ploughshares in on-going. It's not something we do once and are done with. We do it every day of our lives. That's part of the not-yet of Advent. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, "Our whole life is Advent" – the already and the not yet. Let us live into the Advents of our lives. Amen.