

Down by the Riverside
Isaiah 2:2-5
August 13, 2023 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC
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When I was a teenager, my father worked for a company called E-Systems. It was a Texas-based corporation that – among other things – built those giant antennas, covering more than 100 acres each – that supported scientific communication globally and that sent messages out into the universe, messages that are still on their way to some galaxy far, far away. My father was the primary contractor for many of those huge antennas, and my brother-in-law actually worked on the construction of the one in Arecibo, Puerto Rico that opened in 1963.

Antennas were not all that my father worked on while he was at E-Systems, but it was pretty much all he could talk about, because E-Systems was a military contractor, and this was the height of the Vietnam War. My father had a high security clearance because of his work. When I would come home with some new, adolescent, liberal idea, he had an irritating habit of saying, “Cathy, if you knew what I know, you wouldn’t think like that.”

When the Vietnam War began to wind down, Dad’s company needed to diversify. They needed to do something besides supporting the war effort, because the tax dollars for military activities was about to take a steep nosedive. E-Systems would not be able to survive on military contracting alone. So, my father was the leader for a new project to manufacture parts for tractors. The company was moving from the military-industrial complex to the agriculture-industrial complex. When war ends, you have to do something with all the money and effort and time that went into supporting the war. So, it’s time to grow food instead. As Dad said, they were “beating their swords into plowshares.”

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Today’s scripture is from the book of the prophet Isaiah, who lived in Jerusalem about 750 years before Jesus was born. So, we need a quick refresher on this period:

You have heard me say before that after King Solomon died, the nation of Israel split into two separate nations. The Northern Kingdom comprised 10 of the original 12 tribes of Israel. This kingdom took the name Israel for itself. Its first capital was Shechem. The Northern Kingdom was larger and richer than their southern cousins, but their kings were all a hot mess, and their stories are filled with violence and intrigue. Swift economic changes in this Northern Kingdom led to an unstable social and economic pyramid. You only have to know this much to guess that the Northern Kingdom of Israel is headed for disaster.

The Southern Kingdom consisted of just 2 of the original tribes of Israel. It was called Judah, and its capital was Jerusalem. Judah was smaller and poorer than their northern cousins, but they had better kings, all in the direct lineage of the Great King David. With their more stable leadership, the Southern Kingdom of Judah moved fairly smoothly from an old tribal organization to a town economy. There were injustices in Judah, to be sure. The prophets tell of big landowners swallowing up the holdings of small farmers, and the rich taking advantage of the poor. But by and large, Judah preserved a social equilibrium that their northern cousins might have envied, and that stability was symbolized by the crown of the House of David.

The greatest of these Davidic kings was Uzziah. Under his reign, Judah reached the very peak of its economic and military power. He modernized the army and conquered the Philistines, gaining control of

the main commercial highways. He reconstructed the trade-route seaport city of Elath. And he developed Judah's agriculture. It was a golden period. But Isaiah received his call to prophesy in the year that King Uzziah died. If this were a movie, you could almost hear the background music getting dark and scary. You could easily guess that Judah is going to go through a rough patch just then, and indeed crisis followed crisis, mostly due to threats from the growing Assyrian empire. Judah would need a prophet to help them stay on God's path. Isaiah was that prophet.

Wherever the Judeans looked in the world around them, they saw danger, they saw war. The Assyrians were advancing on the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and indeed Israel was defeated in 720 BCE. The Assyrians did the worst thing imaginable – they dispersed the Israelites throughout the Assyrian territory, some here and some there, never to come home again. When you hear of the “lost tribes of Israel,” this is that that phrase means. It was a horrible fate for the Northern Kingdom.

Tiny Judah was so vulnerable. They must have wondered if God was still their protector. They must have feared that peace would never come, not really, not that they would ever see.

And so, we come to this beautiful passage from the second chapter of the Book of Isaiah, offering the people hope, even in the face of terrible danger. It is such beautiful poetry, that I am just going to read it again, and I invite you to drink in the hope that is in this passage, the promise that God will act within history, not off in some mythical future, to bring peace with justice to our world.

In days to come the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it.  
Many peoples shall come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.”  
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.  
He shall judge between the nations and shall arbitrate for many peoples;  
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 any more.  
O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!

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 any more. What a glorious day!

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Our spiritual hymn for today is the beautiful “Down by the Riverside,” which sings of the joy, the incomprehensible joy of that day when war cannot plague us anymore. When we lay down the burden of sword and shield. When we don't have to study war. When we refuse to study war. What a joyous day!

Isaiah promises us, “They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.” May God hasten the day when peace prevails with justice throughout the world, when children are not killed or terrorized by war, when families are not separated by war, when nations find a different way, a godly way, to settle their differences. May we all have to come to that moment, and soon, when we have to figure out what we are going to do with all the money and effort and time that now support war, or preparations for war, or “just in case.” O God, send that day soon, when we have to figure out how to beat our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks. Send that day soon, Lord. Send it soon.

Amen