

What a glorious picture Isaiah paints! In this passage, we see God's house established up on a high mountain. It's natural that water would flow down from a mountain, but our image is that people are heading up the mountain to learn from God. It's a pilgrimage of sorts and there are so many people making their way up that it looks like a reverse stream. God's people turn away from ways of old and turn to new ways of being together! It is surely a lovely aspirational picture for Isaiah's audience....just as it is for us.

We know that the Kingdom of Judah has changed dramatically at the time of Isaiah's prophesy. Once strong, it's no longer the great nation it once was. Isaiah envisions a different future.

Prophets see what is and what can be. They're like the architects and designers of HGTV—the ones who can walk into a mid-century modern house in disrepair and they can add rooms and halls and move doors. Since they're speaking on behalf of God, they've got God's vision. And it's not just a future that's better for some, but for all nations.

For humans, hope is inextricably tied to expectation about a future outcome. For Christians, hope is inextricably tied to faith.

Can people have hope without faith? Sure. You can hope it won't rain on the parade or snow on a day you have to travel, but that's not Christian hope (or Biblical hope). That's a passing, self-indulgent wish. To have Christian hope is to believe that change is possible when all signs point to the contrary. It's to believe that the future will be peaceful when all you hear are the sounds of war. It's to believe that you can experience joy when all you feel is sorrow. It's to believe that you will feel love when all you feel is bitterness.

Isaiah envisions a time when people are united in God. God's knowledge, God's teachings, and God's righteous judgment. When this time comes, the swords and spears will be beaten into plowshares. The weapons, formerly instruments of destruction, will be used as instruments of construction. Tools that would take life to tools that will sustain life (by growing food). And, by the way, this is certainly one of a very early example of recycling and repurposing—this was written almost 3,000 years ago!

We can't separate ourselves from our context as children of the Resurrection. In other words, despite what we see, we know, to borrow some words from Wendell, love always wins. Always. Death doesn't have the final say. Destruction doesn't have the final say. There is always renewal and even what psychologists today call “post-traumatic growth”.

What can it look like to turn weapons into plowshares? It can look like trees. In the city with the “highest rate of gun death” in Mexico, an artist collected over 1500 guns. They were melted down and turned into shovel heads....and those shovels were used to plant over 1500 trees. (Artist is Pedro Reyes and the place is Culiacán, Mexico.)

www.pocho.com/chilango-artist-melts-1527-guns-makes-shovels-to-plant-trees/?fbclid=IwAR0HOASU423v6Aj39ao38XrLipvtRoV-FtKY8LsD5V33rCPMEz3ZkAhWN4E

What can it look like when weapons are turned into plowshares? It can look like a field of rice. Hope came to Cambodia. Twenty-five years ago, in Cambodia, landmines killed or injured over 4,000 people. Ten years ago that number was down to fewer than 300. Still a tragic number, to be sure, but down to less than ten percent of the high. More than a dozen programs are in place to rid the country of landmines and to provide assistance to survivors. Fields, formerly full of mines, are now full of fields of rice paddies.

What can it look like when weapons are turned into plowshares? It can look like a cafe in India. Sheron's Hangout is a coffee shop selling gourmet coffee and snacks just half a mile from the Taj Mahal. This cafe is run by survivors of acid attacks. One of the women is the bookkeeper, another is a seamstress who sells clothing in the cafe. It provides hope and help for the disfigured survivors. It educates others about this issue. In India, a

liter of acid can be purchased for fifty cents and there are 1000 attacks recorded annually. It's suspected that there are far more, but the families don't share for shame and fear of another attack.

What can it look like when weapons are turned into plowshares? It can look like people proud to say they live here. The scripture today says that 'nations' will go up to the mountain of God, in Jerusalem. Nations means people from other countries. And right here in Maine, we've experienced that. Just an hour north. Over the summer, hundreds of asylum seekers fled dangerous and disturbing conditions. They came here. The director of a refugee assistance program (himself a refugee from the Democratic Republic of Congo), said one of the most poignant things that he heard from the asylum seekers who came to Portland was this: "We are glad that we have reached a safe place. We can't go back to our home country. Here is our home country."

(<https://www.pri.org/stories/2019-06-17/portland-maine-turns-crisis-opportunity-african-migrants>)

In the face of death, with God there is hope. In the face of destruction, with God there is hope.

The ground of faith acts as the access point for all of the gifts we'll receive over the following weeks in Advent. The gifts of hope, peace, joy and love. Each of these offerings is to be opened and applied. Only once we embody each of these aspects can we be fully prepared to welcome in the Christ child.

Each week during Advent, we are given a gift. This week, it's hope. Now we need to accept it and integrate it into our lives. This may require some work on our part—whether it's a new perception of what is possible or letting go of what has been so that we can experience what can be.

Here are some things to ponder this week: Where do you see a need for hope? Where have you already seen God's hand in bringing about hope? And, perhaps the most important thing you can think about this week is this: Where and how can you bring hope to others? Blessed be and amen.