

Faith Mennonite Church
August 19, 2012
Seek Peace and Pursue It
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Daring to Dream
Isaiah 2:1-5

There's a troubling pattern in our country. Each time there is a random, lethal shooting—the January 2011 shooting in Tucson, AZ that injured Representative Gabby Giffords, and this summer's theater shooting in Aurora, CO, and in the Sikh temple near Milwaukee—after each of these events there has been an uptick in gun sales. No measured pause to grieve and say, “enough!” Some of the increase is due to people fearing that they might need to defend themselves and believing that having a gun would make them safer. Others fear that congress may enact gun-control legislation that would limit their future ability to buy guns and ammunition so they stockpile now. Sadly, discussion of gun control has been largely muted in this country due to the incredible lobby power wielded by the National Rifle Association. So fear wins the day and the US continues to lead the world in the per capita number of private fire arms—around 88 per 100 people.¹ Our closest rivals are Serbia, Yemen and Switzerland.

Contrast our reality with that of the Prophet Isaiah. Some 2700 years separate us, yet the vision he held forth continues to inspire. Isaiah and the country of Judah, the southern kingdom where he lived and prophesied, weren't facing random acts of violence by unstable individuals or small terrorist groups. They were facing a head-on bombardment by Assyria, the regional empire that was trampling and conquering countries in their reach. Judah would fall victim and its elite would eventually be carried into captivity.

Isaiah interpreted these unfolding events as a consequence of Israel and Judah's unfaithfulness—the sinful wrongs committed by the people of God. But he neither despaired nor encouraged his people to resist and build fortifications to protect themselves. Instead, time and again he summoned the people “to trust in the Lord, the Holy One of Israel. Kings in particular and the people as a whole are told to neither fear nor trust nations and armies, but the one who has authority over all things (31:1). With Jerusalem in trouble, the message from the Holy One of Israel is: 'in returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and trust shall be your strength'” (30:15).²

In this morning's reading we have an interesting image of hope against hope. The powerful invader may not be too far away, yet Isaiah is imagining an entirely different picture. Instead of armed invaders, he describes a stream of peaceful pilgrims coming to Jerusalem, God's city, from every part of the world. They come not to conquer but to learn and to be led. Isaiah's image is part fanciful: Mount Zion, the seat of the temple, which in reality is not the highest peak in the region—this mountain, firmly established—rises up above all the other hills. People see it and become a backwards-flowing stream...streaming *up* the mountain toward God.

Although in this vision this mountain has been raised above all others, the point is not to dominate in a strategic military way, but to show a new way, to be an example of a just peace. In this passage God is imaged not as a King who punishes but as a God who judges and arbitrates fairly and teaches the nations. The outcome is that everything gets transformed: weapons get melted down and remade into farm and garden tools; no one studies war craft anymore.

One commentator has written: "Th[is] passage brings home to all who hear it the power of expectation and it kindles hope. International peace may not come, even as we visualize it and hope for it. Wishing, and even praying, will not necessarily make it happen. But it certainly will not come unless we imagine it, unless we believe and articulate the vision that God wills the end of war."³

¹ Based on 2007 figures. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Number_of_guns_per_capita_by_country.

² Gene M. Tucker, "The book of Isaiah 1-39," *The New Interpreters Bible, Vol VI*. Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2001. 40.

³ Ibid. 70.

In January I spent a week in Honduras, which is now classified the most violent country in the world, due to the per capita number of homicides. I asked a Honduran friend whom we worked with in the 1980s, how he understood the roots of the current violence. He painted a complex picture that included neoliberal economic policies, the aftermath of the devastation of Hurricane Mitch in the late 90s, and somewhat surprisingly, the peace accords in El Salvador and Guatemala that ended decades of civil war. The problem was that no one in power at the time of the peace accords called in the weapons to melt and recast them as farm tools or pieces of art. Neither were soldiers retrained in productive, civilian occupations. Instead the guns went on the market and ended up in the hands of drug dealers and disenfranchised gangs. After generations of making war, few people had the skills to teach the way of peace.

It was gratifying, however, to find that the Mennonite Church in Central America, although small and not particularly prosperous, not only dreams but walks and teaches the way of peace. Through *Red Paz*, the Peace Network, Mennonites and other Christians committed to peace, lead workshops, work at community development, and are trying to bring principles of conflict resolution into the public schools. They tell stories of children, having learned simple techniques of peaceful communication at school, bringing these home to their families settings, which can often be places of strife and violence, in part because of the hopelessness of poverty. In the midst of violence, our Mennonite brothers and sisters in Honduras are daring to live into the vision of Isaiah because of their faith in the power of Christ's love.

Last week a number of us from Faith attended an interfaith gathering at a community center in St. Anthony. We were hosted by members of the Islamic community that was recently denied permission by the St. Anthony municipal council to build a mosque there. That decision was reported to have been based on the technicalities of zoning regulations, but reports from the community hearings suggest that the primary reservation of many who spoke was fear of the other.

This gathering was part of the "Taking Heart" program developed by the Minnesota Council of Churches several years ago as a way to build friendship among persons of Christian, Jewish, and Islamic faiths. Last year the program began this new initiative to provide greater understanding of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, a time of fasting and deepened surrender to God. We gathered for a presentation about Ramadan, followed by breaking the fast at sundown by eating dates and samboozas and drinking water before the evening prayer. We were invited to observe and participate appropriately in the evening prayer and then join in the Iftar, the celebrative, fast-breaking meal.

The gathering was at least a partial vision of the streaming of the nations. We were Somali, persons of Scandinavian and other European decent, Filipino, African American, Jewish. We did not share an identical faith, yet our gathering was a testament to our desire to follow the God who arbitrates fairly and brings peace, our desire to live into Isaiah's vision of no more war.

Verses 3 and 5 in this morning's passage speak of walking...walking in God's way... walking in the light of the Lord. Church of the Brethren scholar Robert Bowman writes: "A vision remains only a daydream without the invitation and a commitment to start living as if the Bible were true."⁴

O people of God, come let *us* walk in the light of the Lord! Let us dare to dream, to live *by* the dream, to live *into* the dream.

⁴ Robert Bowman, "Bible insight for the teacher: Isaiah 2:1-5," *Gather 'Round* curriculum, Summer 2012, MennoMedia.