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Isaiah 2:1-5
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Duke Chapel

Baring our Swords

[God] 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.

When I first came back to Duke in the fall of 1999, Will Willimon invited me to preach on the Sunday closest to the fourth of July for the next three years in a row. Then I took a year off, garnering a spot in February, and the following summer returned to the first Sunday of July. Of all the Sundays in the summer when he needed to fill the playbill with lesser-known stand-ins, why did I get stuck with the Star-Spangled Sunday for three years in a row? Because I can be trusted...

When I was in South Africa this past August for a short time, I called home to chat with my family and I told my mother one night, “You know, it’s really hard to be an American over here because people are so disgusted with our government’s policies.” And she answered, “Well, at least you agree with them.” So, of course Will Willimon invited me to preach on the Fourth of July Sunday for three years in a row. Nobody else around here wants to do it because they all want to be on vacation that week, but because everybody in America is on vacation that week, the Chapel always has a big crowd, so we can’t put just anybody up here. We have to keep the Chapel’s reputation intact as a pulpit of political liberalism. I can do that.

That’s how it is from this pulpit. Am I right? Week in and week out, most people who stand here are critical of the big systems—politics, economics, church bureaucracy, even the

Duke administration, doesn't matter. So, when I encounter a text like the 2nd chapter of Isaiah on the 1st Sunday of Advent, coupled with an apocalyptic vision from the Gospel lesson of people disappearing in the middle of the day—one taken and one left behind—I want to write a sermon that will affect foreign policy for the United States of America. I want to talk about students who mass on main quad in support of the people who do the hospital laundry, or students who light candles on the Chapel steps to call attention to the violence in the Sudan. I want send to Washington pictures of Philip Berrigan pounding on a nuclear war head with his hammer, beating that sword into a plowshare, that spear into a pruning hook. That would be an easy sermon to write because those are issues that I feel passionately about: war, poverty, hunger, health care. I've got arguments, ad nauseum, for all of those things—based on Scripture, by God. I could preach that sermon for you today; it would be appropriate, it would be based on the text, and I would have followed in the proud tradition of Duke Chapel pulpiteers who rage against the machine.

I could do that except for one thing. I carry a sword. It's mostly a sword of self-defense, although sometimes I have wielded it offensively. I'm not particularly fond of it, but I find it necessary and, in some respects, comforting. Not comfortable, mind you, but comforting because I need it and it's comforting to know that I have it. People who carry swords get a little uncomfortable when Isaiah starts talking about plowshares. If I can't protect my turf, what's the point of having a plow? So, while I'd really like to rise to the occasion and bash some American foreign policy—and I may save some time for that—I think what I really have to talk to you about today are our swords and our spears, where we hide them and when we use them.

How easy it is for us within the fortress of Duke Chapel to feast on our steady diet of political liberalism, to act as though the aggression and fear that rule our lives are matters beyond

our control. We did our part for peace after all; we voted for John Kerry. Didn't we? Maybe not; doesn't matter because war isn't just between nations, fought in some far off place like Assyria or Babylon, Iraq or Afghanistan. War isn't just waged with bullets and bombs calculated by experts who spend months practicing for the opportunity to use a rocket launcher. War is also personal. Now granted in the historical context into which Isaiah spoke the words we heard this morning, Isaiah is talking about nations and their instruments of war. I know that, but I also know that our personal wars can be deadly for us and those closest to us as well. At the risk of sounding pietistic, which I routinely renounce as a hollow echo of the Gospel message, I must say to you that what goes on in here matters enormously to what goes on out there.

Weapons don't have to make the NRA's top ten most desirable list. We create weapons all the time. Our words; our lack of words. Think about how much damage silence can do. What about absence? War isn't always caused by being there; sometimes it's about not being there. Think of the Church's absence and silence during slavery, during the Holocaust, during the last election (just a little politicizing). Think of our own silences, our own refusal to stand up for what is economically right because it could impact our portfolio, or socially just because it could jeopardize our jobs, or faithfully true because the church has no business meddling in that stuff. Silence is definitely a weapon. Absence is a great military tactic. We probably use each of these more effectively than we launch offensives. What other weapons do we have that keep us under the tutelage of war, that make us pupils of this art?

Waging war doesn't come easily whether it's nation-state against nation-state, hand-to-hand combat, or verbal haranguing. We must learn it—Isaiah says as much. We must study it extensively; practice it rigorously. What would the world be like, what would our own lives look

like, if we dropped that class? I've heard people say that if we stopped studying war and stopped preparing for it, that wouldn't stop the wars. We'd still have them; they'd just be sloppy and so more people would get killed. But at the end of the day, the only sword I can control is my own. So, if I beat my sword into a plowshare and the enemy continues to come at me with a sword, then my death is not a casualty of war. It's murder.

But who wants to be murdered any more than they want to be hit by sniper fire while storming the streets of Fullujah? Better to keep the sword ever ready, maybe not in plain sight, but close at hand. Better to stay informed about the latest theories of amassing power whether at the United Nations or in the corporate board room or even simply in our own homes. Better to let the plowing wait; keep the sword sharp. Stay in control, for after all, control is the sharpest sword of all. We never want to be out of control, but control is also the most difficult weapon on which to maintain our grip. When we lose control it can be as bad as a smart bomb turned stupid. We don't know where it will land; we don't know how big the explosion will be; we don't even know if we might blow up ourselves.

It's a hard year to talk about peace, it's a hard day to honor Advent because we're starting to get used to war. One of my students remarked right after the presidential election that the war in Iraq might have had more impact on the election if the average citizen felt the effect of this war more personally. But most of us keep up with this war the way we watch football scores leading up the Bowl Championship Series. We don't know anybody who plays football for those really good teams, so we're only interested in the score. Most of us don't know anybody fighting in the Middle East. I don't know anybody over there. I did, but my brother came home in September, so I don't know anyone anymore. Of course, I know that there are other brothers and sisters every bit as beloved as mine still in harm's way, but you know as well as I do that the

personal relationship amplifies the anxiety. When it's personal we watch the evening news hungry for numbers: brigade numbers, battalion numbers, and squad numbers. Did we hear our number called? And if so, how many people were injured? God forbid, what was the death toll? That's the way we listen to the news when we know somebody.

I think every time a new division is deployed in this war, every family in this country should draw out a name and form a personal relationship with an individual who is going off to fight. If you've been to the Holocaust museum in Washington, DC, then you know how that works. You draw a name and walk the halls of that place through the eyes of the person whose name you hold in your hand. It changes the way you look at the displays and read the captions. And in your walk through the museum if death comes for the one whose name you hold in your hand, you feel it. When someone you love is in harm's way it will change the way you read the paper and watch the news and think about weapons.

When the DC sniper was on the loose a few years ago I woke up every morning anxious for the latest news from NPR. Some of my closest friends live in the very DC suburbs that were gripped by fear and while I never believed that I would wake up and hear the name of one of my friends called out as the latest victim, I still knew that my friends lived under unbelievable stress—afraid to stop for gas on the way home from work, afraid to go to the grocery store, afraid to leave the children at school. And so I woke each morning hoping for news that this horror in their lives would be over. Imagine if we all held in our hands the name of an Iraqi family and listened for news of them every day with growing anxiety. The sword would feel much more personal then. Using it would be much more complicated, fraught with ambiguity and uncertainty.

One of the more prominent features of this vision for peace from Isaiah is that everyone needs to learn about peace. The directional flow of this instruction makes all the difference in the world—first we must gather in God’s presence on equal terms, no one nation more just than another, no one person more righteous than another and we learn—we all learn from God—we all study peace. Under God’s instruction no one nation gets to tell another nation what peace looks like; no single individual gets to tell another individual what justice looks like. Each of us takes our cue from God, but we have to show up for class. We must make ourselves open to the presence of God in our lives. We must gaze always on the faithful, loving embrace of the only one who can be trusted to carry a sword because God is the only one who knows how and when to use it. In the certainty of that gaze we can learn to plow rather than fight, prune rather than kill. None of us have the luxury to stop evaluating our ways in light of God’s will for us.

If war is hard to learn, why should peace be any easier? Peace is serious business. We can’t just pick it up like a hobby. We have to practice it and like any acquired skill, we have to use it over and over and over again to get really good at it. I used to know the periodic table from beginning to end, but I don’t even know what the first five elements are anymore. I don’t use chemistry; I haven’t used it since the first week of my freshmen year of college when I went to two lectures, one lab, and the drop-add office in that order. Why do we think it would be any easier for us to retain the lessons of peace—if, indeed, we had ever learned them—if we don’t continue to study them and practice them? We shouldn’t expect to retain it. We can’t. We don’t.

When we come into God’s presence and review the grand tapestry of God’s mercy throughout history, we can’t help but notice its totality: no trouble is beyond the reach of God’s mercy, no quarrel is beyond God’s reconciliation, no abandonment renders us so helpless that

God cannot help. What would our lives look like if we studied those truths more fervently than we study office politics, corporate networking, or weapons of mass destruction? For starters, it would mean we don't need a sword. Most of our swords are for self-protection anyway, and even when they aren't we still convince ourselves they are. Most of us keep our swords carefully out of sight because we have no intention of using them unless there's no alternative. But what if we actually believed in the possibility of God's mercy, that no trouble, no quarrel, no abandonment is beyond God's reach? With God reaching out to enfold us, right along with all the ones from whom we believe our swords will protect us, we will find that we don't need our swords.

The Prince of Peace whose advent we announce today carries no sword, no spear. How can this one come into our midst unprotected when we've all got something hidden that we can use to protect ourselves? Where do you keep your sword hidden? And how do you know when to use it? Most of life is lived in this wide gray area of ambiguity and uncertainty. Sometimes there's a sliver of pure right or absolute wrong on the outer edges, places where we convince ourselves we might need a sword. So we keep one handy, just in case. But there's only been one who stood with certainty in the place of no ambiguity, the only place where a sword can rightly be put to use. And the one who stood in that place told his followers—and we are they—put away the swords. You know the story when they came for Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. They came out to arrest him with swords and clubs as if he were a bandit; and one of his disciples took a sword and struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his ear. But Jesus touched his ear and healed it. And he said, "No more of this."

No more of this. Amen.