

The house lights go off and the footlights go on. Even the chattiest in the audience stop chattering as they wait in darkness for the curtain to rise. In the orchestra pit, the violin bows are poised. The conductor has raised his baton. In the silence of a midwinter dusk, there is far off in the deeps of it somewhere a sound so faint that for all you can tell it may be only the sound of the silence itself. You hold your breath to listen. The curtain rises. A prophet walks onto the darkened stage singing in a circle of light. As the music of the orchestra swells, the prophet sings this: "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.'"

With these words, Scripture's first words to us in the season of Advent, the prophet Isaiah proclaims to the people of his time that hope is coming soon. He describes a time when God will reign and the world will be at peace. Isaiah is speaking to a politically divided community engaged in warfare. There is much pessimism and hopelessness. The Middle Eastern world of the 8th century before Christ is in shambles and the people live in darkness. But, Isaiah proclaims, things are about to change. Isaiah calls his people to hope rather than fear.

Isaiah begins by declaring that in God's future, the holiest ground becomes the highest ground, and from this place of awe God calls to the nations, who flock to it. A new community is being gathered, a community of all races and cultures and languages. Coming near to the holy place, they urge each other on and call out to each other their longing for God's presence. It is that longing that draws them to the place where they will hear the teaching of God.

This teaching, it turns out, includes arbitration. God "shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples." In other words, God will not only speak, but will also listen to the grievances, disputes, and concerns of the nations, and he will make judgments. God gives to all the gift of justice. Inequities are ended, which leads to the ending of violence and division. Since the reasons for envy, greed, resentment, retribution, and fear have been abolished, weapons are irrelevant and can now be transformed into instruments for tending the land and feeding the people. "They shall beat their swords into plowshares," the prophet says, "and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."

Some of you may know that these words from Isaiah are engraved on a wall at the United Nations headquarters in New York City, and a large sculpture of a blacksmith beating a sword into a plowshare adorns the U.N. grounds. In Washington D.C., there is a large plowshare sculpture onto which thousands of disabled guns have been welded. The label reads "Guns into Plowshares."

But in order for that peaceable future that Isaiah describes to come to pass, his people are urged to "walk in the light." *We* are urged to walk in the light. Those who hear this promise of future peace are called to go walking toward it "in the light of God."

Isaiah's description of the future of God points to a time within human history. Real nations in real time will bend their weapons toward the cultivation of the real earth. Such a vision must strike us as absurd as we dwell in the current reality of American involvement in a seemingly endless war in the Middle East and a record-increase in hate crimes on U.S. soil since the Presidential election. Swastikas are being spray-painted on school walls. Last week in the San Francisco Bay Area, where I grew up and most of my family still lives, a beloved African-American musician, Will Sims, was beaten and shot to death by three white men, simply because he was black. And, closer to home, you may have heard on NPR ten days ago that in Plattsburgh, a man named Tenzin Dorjee, a naturalized U.S. citizen from Bhutan, has just in the past few weeks been the victim of an onslaught of racial slurs, threats, and vandalism. Mr. Dorjee owns a popular restaurant in Plattsburgh and has contributed in many positive and productive ways to the Plattsburgh community. By all accounts, he is a caring, loving, decent person. Yet since the election, more than once he has been subjected to words like these: "Hey chink, get the f---- out of my country. Go back to where you came from." On another occasion, he was out running errands when two elderly men in a car cut him off on purpose and flashed him the middle finger.

Given all these recent actions of hate, the Advent themes of hope, peace, love, and light seem awfully far

away, even impossible.

But Advent is a season in which God makes the impossible, possible. It is a season in which we are tempted to blurt out the question of Mary to the angel Gabriel: "How can this be?" Yet Mary finds out that with God all things are possible. Isaiah tells us that God's own justice and peace will occur among the nations "in days to come." When? How? Only *God* knows, we say.

And yet. And yet.... What seems so far away, so impossible, may be closer at hand than we realize. In some ways, Isaiah's vision describes what God is already doing in the world.

Here is a true story: About ten or twelve years ago, during the height of our war in Iraq, a reporter named Basil Mathews was walking along the dusty streets of an Iraqi village. Mathews met a young Iraqi boy playing a flute. The reporter asked to see the flute and it seemed surprisingly heavy. After examining it he discovered it was made out of an old gun barrel. The boy explained that he had picked up the gun in an area where there had been fierce fighting. He filed it down and drilled holes in it. From a weapon of destruction he had created an instrument of music.

And, even closer to home....

According to NCPR, after Tenzin Dorjee experienced the threats and vandalism directed at him, he was afraid, so he considered buying a gun for self-defense, even though he was a Buddhist and buying a gun went against everything he believed. He changed his mind, though, and instead of buying a gun he determined to fight back with love and compassion. His reaction triggered a powerful response from his community. On the Tuesday before Thanksgiving, his restaurant was packed. People kept asking him how he was doing. There was an outpouring of love and care. His phone has been off the hook with people calling and messaging in support. Mr. Dorjee said, "Every time I speak to somebody, my heart swells to know that we can counter any hate with this kind of goodness." Someone also wrote "Love Zone" in chalk on the sidewalk outside his restaurant. And last week, at the Lake Champlain International Film Festival, the organizers decided to give Mr. Dorjee the first-ever given Mandala Award, to honor a citizen who embodies the values of human decency, kindness, and love. Mr. Dorjee said about this entire experience, "It makes my resolve even stronger to counter [the message of hate] with the way I'm doing it right now...to spread the message of love."

My friends, imagine how different our world would be if we could convert guns to musical instruments, tanks to tractors, and fighter jets to emergency ambulances. Imagine how different it would be if swastikas were replaced by peace symbols, middle fingers by handshakes, and racial attacks by loving embraces. My friends, God calls us to hammer away at those parts of our lives that are more like swords than they are plowshares. He invites us to "walk in the light of the Lord." God calls us to walk toward the peaceful future that God promises us by making choices in the light of the Lord. God calls us to, like Tenzin Dorjee, to make choices with creativity and a vision of love and hope and peace in our personal lives, in our relationships with others, in our politics, and in our community.

As we "walk in the light of the Lord," we are walking toward the transformed world of God's reign. The light of the world is coming in Jesus Christ, the light no darkness can overcome, and the world will be transformed. We light the Advent candles as a foretaste of the light that is to come in the Christ child. The darkness of the world will not prevail. God's light will not be denied. The reign of God will come.