

**Swords to Plowshares**, November 27, 2022, St. Timothy, Burnaby  
Isaiah 2.1-5; Psalm 122; Romans 13.11-14; Matthew 24.36-44

“[T]hey 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 anymore.”

### *Prayer*

I don't know enough about the world of metallurgy in ancient societies. I know that you could measure the “progress” of a culture by which metals they had learned to work with (because of the varying degrees of heat required). But there are very few things about working in a metal fabrication shop in the ancient world that are appealing. All this pressure to be part of the transformation of weapons into farming implements, beating “swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks”. It sounds like a pretty demanding task.

We live in a wealthy world. And we have storage. It's completely reasonable for us today to imagine owning *both* a pruning hook *and* a spear—well, that is, if we were to own *either* of those tools at all. For many of us, we own *both* a set of winter tires and a set of all-season or “summer” tires. We don't have to convert our summer tires into winter tires each year by driving tiny studs into them only to “convert” them back into all-season tires at the end of the winter by removing all the little metal studs. Sounds exhausting.

But, of course, it is the symbolism of the conversion of weapons to farming implements that is most significant. Especially in the time we are considering.

Biblical scholars believe that this passage from Isaiah comes from the time after a long period of prosperity for both the kingdom of Israel (in the north) and Judah (in the south). This was a period of uncertainty. A period of fear. The Assyrians, in the north, were a dominant super-power. Historians believe that they had an army of hundreds of thousands at the peak of their power, when they were the most powerful army in the world. And they were coming for the people of God. First, for Israel in the north, and then, for Judah in the south.

The Assyrians were known far and wide for their cruelty. In the book of Jonah (which we have been looking at in our Bible Study), their sinfulness is so great that it had even reached to God in heaven. And one of their military “advancements” (if you can call it that) was the development of siege works. Their innovation in this area allowed them to defeat *any* city state, eventually. They just had to surround them, cut off their food and water, and wait until they surrendered (or died). They had the numbers to do it. So, it's no surprise that the people of God kept some spears and swords near by. Given the imminent threat of an invasion and a siege from the Assyrians, a sword or a spear would probably be far more useful than a plowshare or a pruning hook.

But something is lost in translation on us. Most of us aren't farmers. And, on top of that, most of us probably aren't well-versed in the use of ancient war weapons—but please, correct me if I'm wrong—it would be good to know who to call the next time my suburban home is under siege from an invading army. Or aliens. Or zombies. For many people in the ancient world, a pruning hook or a plowshare wasn't just a farming implement, it was the means for their very livelihood. Not just a tool of their trade, something they used to work, but something that got them their food—the food that kept them alive. I was going to do a comparison between computers and smart phone or something to bring the

metaphor into our common day, but I think you get the point. The choice people were making was: farming implements to ensure both work and food for survival, OR, weapons to keep them alive in the event of a (likely) invading army.

We are used to hearing the quotation from Isaiah: “they shall beat the swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.” We’re used to that one. We may be used to it because a nearly *identical* passage *also* appears in the book of Micah. I won’t read it to you now, but have a look at chapter 4—it really is almost identical.

But we can’t forget about the *opposite* passage, in the third chapter of Joel. That passage tells people to *prepare* for war. There, they are told to “beat your plowshares into swords and your pruning hooks into spears; let the weakling say, ‘I am a warrior.’”

Now you understand why I told you how bad it must have been to be a blacksmith (or whatever they called metal-workers) in those days. It seems like this conversion of their tools, back and forth, was constant. The periods of peace were brief—but required people to carry on with important work (like farming). The periods of fear and anticipation of violence were frightening and required people to prepare for battle. A sustained time of safety was elusive. The blacksmith always had to be at the ready for the next conversion of the tools.

The prophecy in Isaiah goes further than just converting their weapons into farming tools, though. It’s not just that they will retire their weapons, but they shall not learn war anymore. For a people who lived close to the largest army in the world—a people renowned for their cruelty and with a desire to conquer—it’s a dangerous proposition to *stop* learning war. Being prepared for battle was just good practice. It was responsible and diligent. But the promise of God was for a period of extended peace. Extended so long that the need to be prepared, the need to be ready for warfare would completely vanish.

And the blacksmiths of the world breathed a sign of relief.

Of course it wouldn’t *just* be the blacksmiths. *Everyone* would be relieved when such a time came. *If* such a time came.

But *when* would it come? How long would they have to wait?

It’s an important question—because we are *still* waiting. ...mostly.

Though we don’t know exactly when this wonderful promise will be fulfilled from on high—even Jesus tells us that *he* doesn’t know when the “day of the Lord” will be, but only the Father knows—we *can* see evidence of the promise’s fulfillment. Do you see it? It’s right here. It’s me!

What am I talking about? Well, I’m talking about me. I am the evidence of the fulfillment of God’s promise.

I have never been in a fight. Not really. Like what I imagine is *most* men who have never been in a fight, I *think* I could probably hold my own. I probably can’t. And I’ll probably never find out. Though I *have* fired a rifle a couple of times, I really have no idea how to use a gun. And military strategy? Forget it. I would have *no idea* how to conduct a battle. I believe in a good fair fight—I even follow the rules when

playing board games—that wouldn't do me any favours on the battle field. Plus, I am so old now that I probably couldn't even manage basic training. It's a good thing that nobody (really) is depending on me to protect them. To defend them.

But that is exactly the point. I don't know how to fight *because I've never needed to*. I don't know how to use weapons *because they aren't necessary in my life*. I have no idea about military strategy because I've been *able* to avoid it. Nobody was depending on me. And the likelihood of me being *needed* (in a military sense) has been close to zero for more than my entire life.

But that's me.

I am a *white* man. I can call the police without fear that I will end up on the wrong side of a bullet.

I am a white *man*. I don't carry my keys tightly clenched between my fingers like makeshift brass-knuckles when I'm walking through a parking garage at night.

I'm a *cis-gendered hetero-sexual* man, so I'm not in danger of hate crimes that might be directed toward me otherwise.

I heard about an 80-something-year-old Jewish man who daily did more push-ups than I ever could. His reason? So the "next time" someone tried something against his people, he would be ready. He was anticipating another holocaust. And, with the rise we've seen in antisemitism lately, sadly, he is wise to be on his guard.

And, just in case you missed it, the Russians are attacking the Ukrainians where they know it will hurt the most. With winter coming, the Russians are targeting the power, water, fuel and food supplies of Ukrainian civilians. They are looking to win this war by starving or freezing the Ukrainians. It sounds almost exactly like another siege, only more modernized than one the Assyrians would have attempted.

So, we have made some progress—I can be ignorant of war—I can be unprepared for war. But we have not had that promise fulfilled. We still need to have the blacksmiths at the ready—we still need to know that we can use our pruning knives as spears in a pinch. And we are still learning war, by necessity.

Most of us, anyway. Those who don't look like me. Most of us are still not reliably safe from conflict or war.

The period of Advent, which begins today, is a time of preparation and a time of waiting. We are waiting for the return of Jesus. We are waiting for Jesus to come back to earth and to fulfill all these promises. We are waiting for a time when "war" is such a distant memory (for *all* of us) that we don't even know *how* to prepare for war anymore.

But let's not kid ourselves. This is not something that is going to happen all-at-once. This is a not a situation that God is going to swoop in and "fix" for us. That's just not how it works. It's going to take time. It's going to take effort. And it's going to happen incrementally. We will need God in our corner to make it work, but we can make progress ourselves. We don't need to just wait for God to show up and fix everything. We need to try to be active in this world and to make things better. Somehow. It won't be easy, but we can make a difference, with God's help.

O people, come. Let us walk in the light of the Lord.

Come, Lord Jesus, come.