

“God’s Department of Peace”
Isaiah 2:1-5

Have you recently thought about the ethical value of your food? I am not referring to our worry about food related to our body weight, especially after Thanksgiving. I am thinking about the connection between what we eat and its effect on our spiritual and psychological well-being. I first considered this issue when I read a book called *Anger* which is written by Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh. In the first chapter of this book, Thich Nhat Hanh raises the issue about anger being something we consume through our senses. He notes that, “Our anger, our frustration, our despair, have much to do with our body and the food we eat...The way we grow our food, the kind of food we eat, and the way we eat it has much to do with civilization because the choices we make can bring about peace and relieve suffering...Not only do we nourish our anger with edible food, but also through what we consume with our eyes, ears and consciousness...What we read in magazines, what we view on television can also be toxic...Newspaper articles, and even conversations, can contain a lot of anger.”

This question about the ethical value of what we consume and its connection to our anger may sound so idealistic but I think it could be one of the key components of our work for peace. As we look at the vision of peace presented to us by Isaiah 2 for this first Sunday in Advent, it is important for us to ground this vision in the daily practices of our lives. How do we not learn war any more in our daily lives?

American historian Will Durant has estimated that there has only been twenty-seven years in all of human history during which a war was not underway somewhere. In fact, it is safe to say that violence remains the single most popular means to resolve conflict in our world. The reality of violence in our world and in our relationships is inescapable. This violence is not only physical. It takes all kinds of forms such as verbal, emotional and physical violence.

The comforting thing for us about this vision of Isaiah is knowing that his context was not that different from ours. Isaiah lived in a time of great turmoil for his people. His words in this chapter were spoken around the year 740 BCE, a time when the people’s spirits were low in Judah: the Assyrian armies were bent on conquest, and social injustice and greed were the norm of the day. Violence was surrounding the life of the people of Israel. It was even leading them down the path of destruction and exile. Their very existence as a nation was threatened by the violence of their times. Yet, out of these kinds of circumstances and out of this kind of despair we hear the words of the vision of Isaiah for incredible peace where people would learn to love their neighbors, where swords are turned into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. Not only that, but also nations will come to have God as the center of their existence. Was Isaiah dreaming? Was he that detached from reality? Was he that naïve? How could he in the face of such circumstances lift up such an amazing vision for peace? Only a few years

after these words were spoken that the northern kingdom of Israel was destroyed by the Assyrians and the people had to be exiled. Reality just seemed so different from what Isaiah was proclaiming. How could his words bring us hope when we live today in a world that is not that different from the world Isaiah lived in? How could we talk about turning our instruments of war into instruments that sustain life when we live in a time of increased security measures at airports and increased violent threats in our neighborhoods and world? How could we proclaim Isaiah's vision for peace when we are engaged in two wars on foreign soil and sharp internal divisions threaten every day the very fabric of our political system? How could we prepare to receive the peace of Christ in our homes and in our world this season of Advent when much of what we consume every day with our senses is fearful and angry?

I don't believe that there are any simple answers to these questions because faith is not about denying reality and the pain and suffering of our lives. What I do believe had captured the imagination of the prophet Isaiah is the potential and vision for God's impossible dream to be a reality. After all, this is how God has acted throughout the history of faith! Over and over again the impossible became possible with God. The impossible vision of God for peace and justice in the world is not something to take place at the end of the world. It is something that we are called to imagine and work for right here and right now. One example of how God has made the impossible possible is by looking at Jacob. In verse 3, God is described as the God of Jacob which is an interesting point. The vision is for peace and nonviolence in the world. Yet, we are reminded of one of the ancestors of our faith, Jacob, whose life was the very opposite of peace. Jacob is the one who picked fights in his mother's womb. His birth was a race, in which he was reaching out to grab the ankle of his brother to hold him back. That is the meaning of his name in Hebrew. His whole life was full of conflict, lies, and theft. Even in his spiritual life, we are told that he wrestled with God physically and got a limp out of it. His marriages were full of conflict. Then his sons had jealousy and conflicts, if you recall the story of Joseph and his brothers. You can safely say that Jacob is the role model for violence and conflict. Yet, out of the life of someone like Jacob God brought a whole nation of faith! Out of the life of a violent man like Jacob, God brought forth a faith that prepared the way for the birth of Jesus Christ, the prince of peace! "The God of Jacob" is the herald of wholeness/Shalom for the whole world. This point is supposed to shake us up and help us pay attention. It is in a way the punch line of the story! If God can do such things as to raise up a nation of faith out of the life of someone like Jacob, then God can be the power that will bring the impossible dream of peace on earth to reality. This can be trusted not because we are ignorant of the violent realities of our world. This can be trusted because God has a long track record in our human history of transforming the most unlikely people to do incredible deeds of love and compassion. This is what the story of Jesus is all about! An unlikely, powerless man is born to an ordinary family. Yet, through this ordinary experience and life, the extraordinary passion of God for peace and justice in the world became part of our human experience.

This Advent season, the vision of Isaiah for God's peace in the world challenges us to look at what we consume or what consumes us? Are we consumed by God's vision for peace in our world? Are our lives and attitudes aligned with that peace? Or are we consumed by fear, violence, anger, criticism, and negative views of the world? Are we ready to join God's department of peace with its impossible dreams and visions for our world? Or are we too captivated by the workings of violence in our world and in our own minds that it is impossible for us to see beyond our fears? May be this Advent season is a good disruption to our thoughts about violence, war and conflict! May be it is what can help wake us to a different vision! This vision may not become a reality in our lifetime but we do know that ultimately through the love of God, our world is being redeemed and transformed to make this vision a reality.

God's vision for peace takes patience, love, courage and a long view of history and time! We are challenged today to look at our personal lives in this season of Advent and to see if they are a reflection of God's vision of peace or a reflection of the world's anger and fear! The choice is ours. Do we believe that the seemingly impossible dream of God is truly possible?

In his book, *The Powers that Be*, Walter Wink tells a story of great transformation from violence to peace. On a Sunday morning in June 1991, Cantor Michael Weisser and his wife, Julie, were unpacking boxes in their new home, when the phone rang. "You will be sorry you ever moved into 5810 Randolph St., Jew boy," the voice said, and hung up. Two days later, the Weissers received a manila packet in the mail. "The KKK is watching you, scum," read the note. Inside were pictures of Adolf Hitler, caricatures of Jews with hooked noses, blacks with gorilla heads, and graphic depictions of dead blacks and Jews. The Weissers called the police and were informed that this looked like the work of Larry Trapp, a Nazi sympathizer and the head of the Ku Klux Klan. The police warned the Weissers that Trapp was dangerous. They even suspected that he was planning on blowing up the synagogue where Weisser was the spiritual leader. Trapp lived alone in a drab efficiency apartment. He was confined to a wheelchair because of late-stage diabetes. He kept assault rifles, pistols, and shotguns within instant reach. When Trapp launched a White supremacist TV series on a local public-access cable channel, Michael Weisser was incensed. He called Trapp's KKK hotline and left a message. "Larry," he said, "do you know that the very first laws that Hitler's Nazis passed were against people like yourself who had no legs or who had physical deformities or handicaps? Do you realize you would have been among the first to die under Hitler? Then he hung up. Weisser continued the calls to the machine. Then one day Trapp picked up. He shouted, "What do you want?" Weisser said, "I just want to talk to you," Trapp said, "You black?" "Jewish," Weisser replied. "Stop harassing me," said Trapp. "Well, I was thinking you might need a hand with something, and I wondered if I could help, I know you are in a wheelchair and I thought maybe I could take you to the grocery store or something," Weisser said. Trapp was stunned to speak. Then he said, "That's nice of you, but I've got it covered. But don't call this number

anymore." "I'll be in touch," Weisser replied. During a later call, Trapp admitted that he was "rethinking a few things." But then he went back on the radio spewing the same old hatreds. Furious, Weisser picked up the phone. "It's clear you're not rethinking anything at all." Weisser demanded an explanation. In a surprisingly trembling voice, Trapp said, "I'm sorry I did that. I've been talking like that all my life...I can't help it...I'll apologize!" That evening Michael led his congregation in prayers for Trapp and his KKK group. The next evening, the phone rang at the Weissers' home. "I want to get out," Trapp said, "but I don't know how." The Weissers offered to go over to Trapp's that night to break bread. When they entered into Trapp's apartment, he burst into tears and tugged off his two swastika rings. Soon all three were crying, then laughing, then hugging. When, a few months later, Trapp learned that he had less than a year to live, the Weissers invited him to move into their two bedroom/three-children home. When his condition worsened, Julie quit her job as a nurse to care for him. Six months later he converted to Judaism, three months after that he died a transformed man, a man of peace and love.

This is the power of God's amazing love: The impossible peace is possible! May we believe, live and work for this vision of peace. Amen.