“Beating Swords into Plowshares”
A Sermon at the First Congregational Church of Buxton, United Church of Christ
The First Sunday of Advent, November 28, 2010
By Rev. Karen Christensen

Scripture: Isaiah 2:1-5

Shall we pray together? May the words of our mouths and the thoughts of our hearts be acceptable to you, God our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen. Amen.

3,741,952 feathery flakes of snow fall on the branch of a fir tree. When the next one falls - snowflake number 3,741,953 – the branch breaks. The dove in this story that I told to the children wonders if, in a similar manner, peace would come to the earth if only one more voice for peace is heard, one more prayer for peace is raised.¹

[Noticing Adam, who comes forward and takes the mike that the candle-lighters were using, and flops down on the front pew.] Hello-o-o-o, Adam. What’s up?

Adam: Not much. I just thought I’d come up front here, so that I could hear the sermon better. I even found a copy back there by the bulletins, so I thought I’d follow along. OK with you?

Um, sure. Why the microphone?

Adam: In case I want to make any comments.

Oka-a-a-y. Where was I?

Adam: You were saying something about snowflakes and prayers for peace.

Um. Thank you. Yes. Well, let me say something first about this beautiful reading from the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah is a very wise man who lives in Jerusalem - more than 700 years before Jesus is born - in a particularly violent time. The kings of Aram and Samaria have attacked the city. The Assyrians besiege the city. In the midst of this warring madness, Isaiah offers this beautiful image of the days to come when all the nations shall stream to Jerusalem to learn God’s ways. God, says Isaiah, will judge between the nations. 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.

Adam: So, when’s that going to happen? If I do the math right, Isaiah wrote those words almost three thousand years ago. I don’t see anyone beating their swords into plowshares. Or their bombs. Or their airplanes. Or their drone missiles.

Oh, Adam. You are right. Certainly there have been peaceful periods of time for some places. Surely there have been, and are, people all over the world who work hard for peace, who pray hard for peace. But this world is still a pretty violent place.

Isaiah is showing us, I think, what is possible. He is showing us what is out there on the horizon somewhere. He’s giving us a vision of what could be. He’s telling us

¹ This is the story I told to the children this morning. It is from Illustrations Unlimited by James S. Hewett, ed., quoted in the worship resource, AHA!, dated December 8, 2002 – a former publication of Wood Lake Books, Inc.
that, ultimately, in the ways that matter most, a Loving God is in charge and has a different dream for us, different from the reality of war and violence.

**Adam:** But what I want to know is, how does God’s dream become a reality? Is it going to be magic that brings peace? Like in the children’s story about the snowflakes? One magic prayer will be said that will be just the right number, and all of a sudden there will be peace everywhere on earth?

No, I don’t think peace will come by magic. But many of us get discouraged. We feel helpless because the problems of the world are so big, and war and violence seem so ingrained in human behavior.

Here’s what the snowflake story says to me. It says, keep trying. It says, keep praying for peace – even when the kind of peace that Isaiah describes seems impossible, pray for the impossible. And if I say a prayer for peace every day of my life, then maybe it will make a difference. I think it will make a difference. It will, at least, make a difference in me. Praying for peace might make me pay more attention to what’s going on in the world. Praying for peace might make a difference in who I vote for, or how I spend my money.

What if peace were contagious?

**Adam:** Yo! What do you mean by that?

Well, what if I have been praying for peace, and someone cuts me off in traffic? Instead of cursing that person, I might say a prayer for them, something like, “May you be at peace. May your heart remain open.” I could say that prayer for myself too. “May I be at peace. May my heart remain open.”

Look, if I practiced saying that prayer every time something or someone irritated me, I can imagine that I’d be a pretty peaceful person. Then if you, for example, did something really annoying like – constantly interrupting my sermon on a Sunday morning – I might just smile and shrug, and maybe even thank you for doing that. If I got angry with you, that would put anger out there in the air between us, and the rest of these folks would feel it. If I could be calm and friendly when you are annoying, then maybe the calm, friendliness would spread through this room.

I really do suspect that peace is contagious.

**Adam:** Yeah, maybe on a small scale – like this room. But what about on a bigger scale? What about the war in Afghanistan, for example?

Well, of course that’s a lot more complicated. Or at least it seems so. When you mention Afghanistan I think about a man named Greg Mortenson. He’s a mountain climber who spent time in Afghanistan making his way up some of the highest mountains in the world. Back in 1993 he was in an Afghani village in the mountains, recovering from a nearly fatal experience on a mountain called K-2. While walking around one day, he came upon some little girls writing with sticks in the dirt. That was the closest thing to a school in that village. Inspired by those little girls so eager to learn, Mortenson has since raised money and negotiated with mountain villages in both Afghanistan and Pakistan to help build 145 schools, mostly for girls.

My mind just wanders off into numbers sometimes. I wonder how many schools we as a country could have helped to build, working respectfully in partnership with the thousands of villages throughout Afghanistan. What if we had spent the money we’ve spent on war for education instead? Building schools in a war zone seems like a prayer for peace to me. A very powerful one.
Adam: Well, that's not going to happen, is it?
No, maybe not. But you and your Mom go every year to the mountains of Honduras to build a house. And this year there are several folks from this congregation going with you. Could you see building houses in Honduras as a prayer for peace?
Adam: I guess so. Yeah. I can see that. Why are we talking about peace today, anyway?
Well, it's the first Sunday in Advent.
Adam: Oka-a-ay. What's Advent?
Advent. It's a quiet, peaceful time in the life of the church – the four weeks before Christmas. It's a time for waiting patiently.
Adam: Whoa! That's not what it's like out there in the stores! The Maine Mall was mobbed with shoppers on the day after Thanksgiving.
I know. Advent is a wonderful contrast for us. Here in church, and hopefully, in our own homes during these four weeks, we can let ourselves think about what might be waiting for us, what mystery the future might hold, what beautiful experience might be just ahead, just out of sight.
Adam: Like lots of presents under the tree?
Maybe. Or something like this. Perhaps we could read this passage from Isaiah about swords being beaten into plowshares and imagine that somewhere out there this kind of peace is waiting – for everyone on earth. Then we might even be tempted to see what we could do to help it become real.
For you, it might mean thinking ahead to June when you'll go to La Vueltoza and meet your friends and begin building another house. That's something that waits for you in the future, something you can wait for quietly here in November.
Our prayers for peace can be closer-to-home prayers, too. Some of us long for peace in our own families. Some of us long for a sense of peace in our own minds and hearts. Whatever shape that longing for peace takes in our own lives, the reality of it waits for us, is worth believing in, is worth leaning our efforts toward, is worth praying for.
And maybe, just maybe, all it will take is one more prayer, one more voice raised for peace, for it to become real.
Adam: Like the snowflakes?
Yeah, like the snowflakes.
It's Advent. In Advent we step back into history and become part of the story. We wait – with Mary and Joseph, with shepherds who haven't yet heard the angels sing, with magi who have not yet spied that unique star in the night sky. In Advent we stand on tiptoe, waiting, watching. Something wondrous is on the horizon. Perhaps it is peace.
Adam: Amen!
Amen.