

I've heard many people say that this is the most stressful time of the year. People who work in the field of mental health report that more people complain of depression and anxiety around the holidays. There are a variety of reasons why people become more anxious or more depressed. For some, the stress of spending time and money that they do not have to purchase the perfect gifts for everyone is overwhelming. Others are stressed by the number of social obligations that have between now and the end of the year. Some people feel a deep sense of loss because it feels like Christmas is just not what it used to be.

We certainly do not control the rest of our society, or what Christmas has become in our culture. We cannot control the traffic around the mall, or around Crocker Park. We cannot change the advertisements on television, or the ones stuffed in our mailboxes. Perhaps we can do something about ourselves. Perhaps we can shift our hopes for Christmas. Maybe we can look at the promises we read about in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah during these four weeks of Advent, and let them direct our attention to something deeper than an endless parade of decorations, gifts, and social gatherings.

Our reading from Isaiah today focuses our hope on a time when the nations of the world will say, "Let us go to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob that he may teach us his ways."

That was always the purpose of Israel. When the Lord called Abraham, the Lord said, "Your offspring will bring blessing to the nations of the world." When the Lord gave the law to the people of Israel, he said that people would see the way Israel ordered itself and see His wisdom. It was a wisdom that would bring peace to the world. It was a wisdom that would make war to cease.

When we lived in Virginia, we would fly out of Norfolk International Airport. There were always young men and women in uniform in the airport. Some were traveling home. Some were on their way to Iraq or Afghanistan. When I saw them, I was struck by a couple of thoughts. First, I was struck by the bravery of these young men and women. Many people have made a sport of complaining about the generation known as Millennials. These young men and women are proof that there are many Millennials that do not fit the stereotype they have been assigned.

The other thing that struck me was a wish that it were not necessary for these young men and women to be sent off to fight. I thought about the waste of life that war is. No matter how noble the cause for which they fought, the Lord did not create us to fight with one another. I longed for a world in which these sailors, soldiers, and airmen and women would be allowed to put their talents and bravery to more creative endeavors.

That is the vision promised by the prophet Isaiah. He said that when the nations of the world were instructed by the Lord, they would beat their swords into plows and their spears into pruning hooks. The Lord could have simply promised that the nations would throw down their weapons, or even destroy their weapons, but he did not stop there. He promised that they would make a better use of them. Rather than using tools of metal to kill one another, they would use

that same metal for life giving and life-sustaining work. They would use their resources and talents to feed one another.

The fulfillment of this promise began with the coming of the infant we celebrate at Christmas. Remember the Magi from the East came to see the one who brought light to the world. Later in his life, some Greeks came to his disciple Phillip and asked to see Jesus. Jesus responded by saying this was a moment of the fulfillment of the promise of the prophet Isaiah. The nations were coming to be instructed by the Lord. You and I are part of the fulfillment of that promise. We have gathered together today saying, "Let us go to the Lord for instruction so that we may walk in His ways."

Of course, we know that the promise has not yet been fully realized. The young men and women in uniform are still necessary. In 2015, the United States still had to spend nearly \$600 billion on defense. We still long for the day when we will be able to use these lives and resources to feed the world, rather than using them for war.

We also know that it is the Lord's promise, and He is the only one who can bring it to fulfillment. In the time between then and now, we can begin to implement the promise in our own lives. Jesus began to fulfill the promise when he came to Bethlehem. He gave his church the authority and power of the Holy Spirit to continue that fulfillment until he comes again as the judge of all nations.

Last week, I heard an advertisement on the radio in which a couple was talking about putting the magic back in the Christmas season. One person suggested, "We could make cookies and take them to everyone in the neighborhood." The other said, "Or we could go to the dealership and get a new car." The advertisement was for an auto manufacturer, so you can guess which one they chose. The announcer ended the ad with the statement that you too can experience the magic of Christmas when you rush out to buy a new car. I would suggest that baking cookies for the neighborhood may have been a better start.

As we prepare for our celebration of the coming of Christ, we might want to remember the promise that the coming of the Lord brings the promise of peace. We cannot control the world around us. We cannot control what the nations of the world do. Nor, can we control the messages our society sends us about how to celebrate. We can make decisions about what we will do.

One thing we can do is invite someone to join us to celebrate Christmas here. We can say, "Come let us go to the house of the Lord that He may teach us His ways and we may walk in His paths." If you are going to be out of town for Christmas, invite someone to go to a church with you wherever you are.

Another thing we can do is examine the ways that we are using our talents and resources. Are we ready to beat our swords into plows and our spears into pruning hooks? We can do this in small ways when we take some of the resources we would spend on ourselves and devote them to feeding others. We can also do this in small ways by setting aside old conflicts and looking for reconciliation. Is there someone to whom you need to apologize? Is there someone whom

you need to forgive? Is there a way that you can act as a peacemaker between others who are in conflict?

As we prepare to celebrate Christmas, let us remember that one of the promises made in Jesus is that he will bring peace. As we submit our lives to His teaching we will become instruments of peace, and representatives of the hope brought by his coming in Bethlehem, and his promise that he will come again.