



I'm coming down from the pulpit because I want to show you this sculpture. It was made by a 14 year old, Luke Risher, who wanted the sculpture to look like a weapon that had been turned into a vase of flowers. Laura Pritchard gave me this sculpture along with the artist's statement, and I want to read a part of it to you. Luke, again, a 14 year old, says: "I made this piece in an 8-week welding course at the Orange Korner Arts Community Center, located in Hunting Park. It was my second time taking the course, and I decided this time, I'd try to make a statement. I have loved the image of guns turned into roses and have many other pieces depicting some form of them. They symbolize new life and beauty out of a destructive or degrading object or situation. This is a modern day representation of the Biblical image of beating swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. The reasons I picked gun violence as a theme are many. One large part is that this passage, which is part of a larger prophecy of God's kingdom, claims that there will be no rifles in God's kingdom. This is not only a symbol of the end of tools used for destruction, but also the transformation of these tools. Specifically, they can be transformed into things that will nurture or care for the earth, which is also a passion of mine, as reflected in this piece. All the materials and metal are different bike parts from broken and used bikes, so this piece shows the earth needs cycles of used objects or resources to be transformed into new resources. Destruction and devastation can be transformed into beauty and life."

When I saw this sculpture, it reminded me of RawTools, an organization founded by Mennonite blacksmiths who were frustrated by the fact that some of the metal from the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City was used to build a battleship. Bothered by the perpetuation of violence, these blacksmiths started RawTools, an organization that takes weapons—fully functioning weapons, even semi-automatic weapons such as AK47s—and turns them into shovels, trowels, and plows.

So both this sculpture, and the organization RawTools interpret today's scripture passage quite literally. They take instruments used to destroy and turn them into tools used to till the ground in order to bring life. RawTools is so named because Raw—R-A-W—is war spelled backwards. The blacksmiths who founded this organization were guided by two passages of scripture. The first, Isaiah 2:4, a portion of today's Old Testament lesson, is the vision that all nations will stream to the Lord's house to worship together. It says, "They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nations will not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war anymore." But RawTools is also founded on a second scripture passage. If you have a pew Bible in front of you, I invite you to open it to Micah chapter 4, verse 3. Read along with me. This vision from the prophet Micah is very similar, almost identical to Isaiah's vision. Listen again for God's word.

In days to come
the mountain of the Lord's house
shall be established as the highest of the
mountains,
and shall be raised up above the hills.
Peoples shall stream to it,
² and many nations 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.'
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
³ He shall judge between many peoples,
and shall arbitrate between strong nations far
away;
they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning-hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more;

This text should sound immediately familiar to us. Again, it's almost identical to Isaiah, except that it adds this verse:

⁴ but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees,
and no one shall make them afraid;
for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken.

I've been thinking a lot about fear this week. When we fear, we are often waiting. And when we are waiting, as we do in this season of Advent, we are often afraid. I grew up in the United Methodist Church in South Carolina, where I learned that the opposite of faith is not *doubt* but *fear*. But I've been a minister now for five years, and my experience is that faith and fear are often inextricably bound, not only in my own heart and in my own struggle to believe, but also in your lives. We're always struggling between faith and fear. And sometimes its as if the two even need each other.

Fear plays an integral role in our society, not only in our own lives, but also in our collective life, in our culture. Fear keeps us safe. We teach our children to be afraid of strangers and the cleaning chemicals under the sink. We teach them to be afraid of car accidents and falls. And we ourselves are afraid of these things. Being afraid keeps us vigilant.

When God appears to people in the Bible, either directly or through a messenger, God usually begins with "Do not be afraid." I used to think that was a command—that in order to have faith we could not also have fear. That fear was, indeed, the opposite of faith. That fear had to be banished in order for faith to grow. But now I wonder if God isn't *commanding* us not fear, but rather acknowledging that we are a people who are afraid. That we have every reason to be afraid as we wait for God to dwell among us in Jesus Christ. God knows that we are afraid.

But fear in excess also causes us to reverse Isaiah's vision. We have a habit of turning plowshares into swords and pruning hooks into spears, not the other way around. We take the things that are intended to build up the body of Christ, and we twist them into weapons. Take *water*, for instance. One week ago this evening, police fired water cannons in 18 degree weather at a crowd of people who were protesting the Dakota Access Pipeline. And water, which is necessary for life, became a weapon.

We turn plowshares into swords with our words. Many of you were dreading being at Thanksgiving tables with family members whose world views dramatically differ from your own. And your ministers have been chided, albeit mildly—and accused of being partisan for using phrases like, "Honor all people" and for having the children draw messages of love and acceptance on the sidewalk in chalk.

Words are meant to uplift: *God loves all people. All are welcome here. You are beautiful and beloved. The peace of Christ be with you.* But these have been interpreted, not as basic Christian principles, but as partisan statements. Honestly, all I can say about that is that if everyone in this room cannot say those statements with Christian conviction, then I don't want to be neutral anymore.

So how will we work to reverse this process? How will we work toward Micah's and Isaiah's visions? How will we work to beat swords into plowshares? First, I think we have to acknowledge the fear. We have a well-founded fear that our country is deeply divided. We have a fear that life is too short—a fear that is repeatedly realized. We have a fear that we'll be rejected by the ones we love, that the grief is too strong for us to get over, that the forces of evil will win in the end. We have to acknowledge that those fears exist.

And then we need to channel the fear. We need to hear God's greeting to us not as a chastisement, but as a greeting of knowing and belonging. It's as if God is saying, the way we say to children who are afraid of monsters under the bed, "I know you're scared. And that's why I'm coming to be with you."

We must fervently pray this Advent that God will do the work of turning weapons into gardening tools in our own souls—that God will turn swords into plows—not so that we can sit back and do nothing, but so that after a hard day's work tilling the soil for the seeds that God will plant, someday, "everyone will sit under their own vines and fig trees, and no one will make them afraid."

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.