A Thrill of Hope: Imagining a New World with Isaiah
by Ellen Williams Hensle

What does Advent mean to you? Perhaps for you Advent means fun celebrations: a month of treasured family traditions, or every day opening a little cardboard square with a surprise behind it, a chocolate coin or a Bible verse, or in the case of one Advent calendar I saw recently on YouTube, a beautifully packaged serving of premium single malt scotch for each day of December (retail price £200).

Perhaps for you Advent means hanging greens and singing some of the best music of the church year, songs by turns mysterious and dancing, by turns longing and joyful, and yes, Handel's indelible settings of Isaiah's prophecies.

Perhaps for you Advent means lighting the candles of the Advent wreath throughout the week or here at church on Sunday, as a reminder that though the days are getting shorter and the nights are growing longer, the darkness *has never* extinguished the light – the darkness *will never* extinguish the light.

Or perhaps you're new to this whole Advent thing or you just haven't thought about it very much. Any and all of these are fine responses. Advent contains multitudes.

Technically Advent comes from the Latin word *adventus*, which means "coming." In this season we call Advent, the four Sundays leading up to Christmas, we celebrate the coming of the messiah, God's Son, Jesus Christ, the baby lying in the manger all those years ago in Bethlehem. And as we celebrate, we also prepare – through penitence and reflection, we prepare our hearts and our lives for Christ's coming again at the culmination of all things. And so Advent is a season of paradox: we joyfully remember Christ's first coming, and at the same time we wait expectantly for Christ to come again – to come again and bring the ultimate fulfillment of God's promises as we read them in prophecies like Isaiah's.

For me, Advent has also come to be a season of lament, a season of deep ache for our broken world. I can pinpoint the moment the meaning of Advent began to shift for me. It was late 2014, and I was a seminary student at Princeton. I was going to chapel everyday, hearing the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah we read each Advent, God's vision for a world of wholeness, a world shaped by hope, peace, joy and love. And in my American Religion/American Literature class, we were reading James Baldwin and talking about how race and racism shape American practices of Christianity, and in turn shape our common life.

Then two ground-shaking verdicts made the national news. The last week of November that year, a grand jury in Ferguson, Missouri decided not to indict the police officer who shot 18-year-old Black man Michael Brown six times, leaving him dead in the street. And then just a little over a week later, on December 4th, a New York grand jury decided not to indict the police officer who choked 43-year-old Black man Eric Garner to death, leaving him dead in the street.

We came to American Religion/American Literature that day and instead of talking about James Baldwin – or maybe, as well as talking about James Baldwin – we talked about what was happening in our country. I listened to the rage, the hurt, the frustration and fear of my fellow seminarians, especially my Black classmates and our Black professor. And together we talked about those Advent prophecies we were reading in chapel – the ones where the prophets tell us that God's intention is for all of us to live together in harmony. Where we won't need guns or police batons or weapons of any kind, for we will be at peace with one another. In those days we will work together to plant gardens for the good of all instead of spending our time fighting those on the other side of the dividing line, Isaiah says.

And sitting in class that day, we wept – we wept for Eric Garner and Michael Brown; we wept for the system that leads us to see each other as enemies to be conquered rather than neighbors to be loved; we wept for the world of peace that God intends for us, a world that in that moment felt like more of a distant dream than an embodied reality that God is bringing toward us. In class that day, we wept tears of Advent lament – tears for what seemed like an unbridgeable gap between what is and what should be.

Isaiah's world of peace must have felt even more like a distant dream to the people who first heard his prophecy. They were preparing for war – preparing for the seemingly unstoppable Assyrian army to invade God's people in the tiny northern kingdom of Israel, while God's people in the tiny southern kingdom of Judah watched on in horror. Eventually a conquering empire would come for the south, as well – the temple in Jerusalem would be destroyed and the people would be shipped off to exile in Babylon. Things were not looking good for God's people – and they were about to get much, much worse.

But in the midst of war and its threat, in a time of desperation, Isaiah speaks a word of hope. Some day, the prophet says – one day all peoples will recognize the goodness of God. One day all peoples will come together to worship. And on that day, the sword and the spear – on that day, all weapons of war will become obsolete. The metal that they're made of, that valuable material – that precious resource will be repurposed into plowshares and pruning hooks, tools for sowing and reaping, tools for growing food that benefits the whole community. Tools of death will become tools of new life. Implements of conflict will become instruments of community.

Swords into plowshares – it's a beautiful vision of God's *shalom*, of the peace with wholeness that God intends for each of us individually and all of us collectively. Swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks – it's a striking image; so striking, in fact, that it is not only used by Isaiah, but elsewhere in the Bible too. Scholars refer to it as the "floating oracle of peace," and it shows up again in Micah and other prophets as well.

This "floating oracle of peace" continues to inspire. The Wednesday Bible study could think of several instances throughout the years of politicians or heads of state quoting Isaiah as they sought to end international conflicts. And the cover art on your bulletin this morning shows a nine foot tall statue of a man lifting his muscled arm to beat his sword into a plow, a gift of the Soviet Union to the United Nations in 1959.[1] A gift given with the Cold War still raging on – a gesture of hope for the human family, and now a reminder to everyone entering the United Nations building of *why* they enter, to pursue God's call to peace as recorded by Isaiah.

On a smaller scale, and closer to home, Isaiah's image of swords beaten into plowshares and spears transformed into pruning hooks inspires the folks at RAWTools, an advocacy organization with an outpost right here in Philadelphia, in Kensington. They hear Isaiah's message of peace as more than a far-off dream for a distant day – they hear it as a call to action. Working in partnership with churches and neighborhood leaders, they invite people in communities affected by gun violence to donate their weapons. After safely disabling the guns, blacksmiths fire the metal – then each person gathered gets the opportunity to beat on the anvil. Together, blow by blow, the community physically reshapes what used to be a weapon into a shovel or a spade. Guns are literally transformed into gardening tools. Tools of death become tools of new life; implements of conflict become instruments of community, built by the community itself.

RAWTools Philly founder Shane Claiborne shared in a TV interview last year about the organization's inaugural event in Kensington.[2] He described the moment they first opened it up for people to pound on the metal, how "a line just started forming. And this one mother," Claiborne said; "this one mother took the hammer and with every thump of the hammer she said, 'this - is - for - my - boy.'" Even filtered through Shane Claiborne's retelling of the story, you can hear the pain in that mother's voice – her anguish for her child, her lament at the chasm between the way the world is and the way God intends for the world to be.

In this Advent season we too cry out our pain. In this Advent season we lament all the violence in our world, the war and the want and the systems that separate us. We call out to God: "God, you said Christ would come again to set all things right – where is he? Why are we left here in such a mess? We know what you want for us and it's very clear that all of this… this isn't it. Where is the peace you promise to us?" we pray. We ache; we long to be made whole – we raise our voices and plead with Jesus to come and redeem all that is broken in our lives and in our world.

And at the same time, we pick up that hammer. In whatever sphere we are called to, we pick up that hammer and, blow by blow, we join God in the work of reshaping our communities into something that more closely resembles Isaiah's oracle of peace. We could wait for Jesus to come and fix it all for us – or we could let the Holy Spirit move us out to where God is already at work making things right.

That's what I love about RAWTools. They don't just sit around and wait for peace to come, though they certainly pray frequently and fervently. Instead, with God's help, they are taking peace into their own hands. It's not someday that swords will become plowshares – it's today that guns will become gardening tools. It starts here, with our own choices in and in our own communities. It starts here, in our own inner lives. As Shane Claiborne goes on to say in the interview about RAWTools: "Just as metal can change, so can our neighborhoods, so can policies, so can a human heart." In this Advent season, may we be open to all that God may yet transform from the precious resources of our lives.