

Nov. 11, 2018  
Isaiah 2:1-5  
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME  
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### ***Walking in the Way of God***

#### INTRO to SCRIPTURE

For today I've chosen a familiar passage from the prophet Isaiah that lifts up a vision of peace and well-being. Isaiah lived in the 8<sup>th</sup> century before Jesus, in the midst of the Iron Age. Iron changed everything and is the basis for the imagery that is central to this reading – beating swords into plowshares. With the development of iron plows in the field, farm productivity greatly increased and more people were being fed. At the same time, the military wanted the iron for making swords. Just as we experience today, there was tension in the nation between domestic and military spending.

Israel was not a great power in that time; but they did have a significant role in and profit from the arms trade, selling chariots and horses to all sides. Isaiah's vision is not only a hope for peace it is also a prophetic commentary - speaking for the majority who were farmers needing plowshares versus the wealthy minority who were making money off swords.

(Bloomingcactus.typepad.com. 11/24/2010)

#### SERMON

President and General Dwight D. Eisenhower shared similar concerns with the prophet Isaiah, even though they lived twenty-seven centuries apart. As the Allied Commander in World War II, Eisenhower knew the military from the inside. As president, he knew the needs of all the people.

So, it is particularly significant that in his presidential farewell address in 1961, he warned of the dangers of what he called the military-industrial complex. Eisenhower's family felt his concerns were expressed best in his 1953 speech, "A Chance for Peace." On his tomb, they put words from that speech:

*Every gun that is made,  
every warship launched,  
every rocket fired  
signifies, in the final sense,  
a theft from those who hunger  
and are not fed,  
those who are cold and are not clothed.*

Eisenhower held a vision of beating our swords into plowshares. In these days of so many homeless vets his words express concern for them.

Today we recognize the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ending of WWI -Armistice day on Nov. 11, 1918. This is why today is Veteran's Day. At the conclusion of our service today we will have a ringing of handbells to honor this 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Then we will have a ringing of the tower bell.

At the end of WWI people hoped it was the war to end all wars. However, the Allies had given the role of negotiating the peace terms to a French commander who chose to intensify the fighting over the weeks of negotiating. In the five weeks after the Germans requested peace negotiations, half a million deaths were added to the war's toll.

As writer Adam Hochschild notes, *in Germany, the conflict left a simmering bitterness that Hitler brilliantly manipulated. It is impossible to imagine the Second World War happening without the toxic legacy of the First.* ( The New Yorker, 11/5/2018, pg. 31)

War is a complex reality in a complex world. New conflicts often come from bad decisions on the part of the victors in previous conflicts. Recognizing how that had happened in WWI, after WW II the U.S. and allies made a conscious choice instead to help their enemies restore. They brought plowshares to Germany and to Japan to rebuild their economies, transforming our relationship with both nations so that we now consider them allies.

We are grateful for the people who have served in the U.S. military and for the ways our country has stood for freedom and justice. At the same time, we are distressed by leaders who have made political decisions with little regard for the people on the front line. Recently, Frank Connors (who shared reflections this morning about his time in Vietnam) and I were talking about the revelations of military leaders years later that they knew the war in Vietnam was going nowhere, even while they were sending people there. Such knowledge is an additional spiritual and emotional burden for Vietnam vets.

We owe our veterans not only appreciation but also support, for many continue to struggle when they get home and for years afterward. The suicide rate for veterans is double that of the general population.

So where is God in all this? I had a WWII Marine veteran, who was in hand-to-hand combat in the pacific theater, say to me *God is not on the battlefield.* I came to understand that to keep himself sane, Richard made a distinction between what he experienced on the battlefield and his faith commitments. We profess that God calls us to do justice and love kindness. Holding those together is a profound challenge in all areas of our lives.

But the Spirit moves in mysterious ways and sometimes God shows up on the battlefield and transforms what is happening. Each year at the Theater Project Christmas program, a group of men tell the story of Christmas Day on the Western Front during WWI in 1914.

In fact, that year there were a number of unauthorized ceasefires along the front where the soldiers reached out to each other, singing carols from their trenches. Everyone recognizes Silent Night, whether in German or English. Some even joined one another on no man's land, singing carols and exchanging trinkets. When military leaders caught wind of what had happened, they sent orders that no such interaction was allowed. Warfare is based on not seeing the humanity of the people on the other side.

Reinhold Niebuhr, a prominent 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian and pastor, was a pacifist in WWI. However, finding himself unable to stay with that position during WWII, he moved toward just war theory, which traces back to Augustine in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Just War theory brings moral considerations to the political and military conversations.

Just War proponents consider the moral reasons for going to war and moral conduct during war. Some recent proponents of this theory think we should add a third factor - the morality of reconstruction after the conflict.

People of faith raise moral considerations, which call us beyond just our own national interests, because we know God loves the whole world.

Jesus called us to love our enemies. In response to this call, many followers of Jesus - including Quakers, Mennonites, and other conscientious objectors – feel called to pacifism.

Jesus called us to love our neighbors. In response to this call, many followers of Jesus believe they need to fight for justice and freedom using military action under very particular circumstances.

Each of us is called to be a peacemaker – both near and far. Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God.