

November 27, 2022
"Plowshares Prayers"
Isaiah 2:1-5 / Matthew 24:36-44
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

This morning we heard Spencer LaJoye's song, "Plowshare Prayer," as our prelude. It begins like this:

*Dear blessed creator, dear mother, dear savior
Dear father, dear brother, dear holy other
Dear sibling, dear baby, dear patiently waiting
Dear sad and confused, dear stuck and abused
Dear end-of-your-rope, dear worn out and broke,
Dear go-it-alone, dear running from home
Dear righteously angry, forsaken by family
Dear jaded and quiet, dear tough and defiant
I pray that I'm heard / And I pray that this works
I pray if a prayer has been used as a sword against you and your heart,
against you and your word
I pray that this prayer is a plowshare, of sorts, that it might break you open,
it might help you grow ...*

Plowshare prayer.

I heard an interview yesterday on the radio while I was driving home. It was an interview from Tonya Mosley's podcast, "Truth Be Told" – in this case with Ayanna Brown, a Seattle mother whose youngest son, 12-year-old Alajawan, was shot and killed in 2010.

Two years before 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was shot and killed by George Zimmerman in Sanford, Florida. Four years before 18-year-old Michael Brown was shot and killed by police officer, Darren Wilson, in Ferguson, Missouri. We know, of course, that George Zimmerman was eventually acquitted, and Darren Wilson was never indicted.

Alajawan was wearing a jacket that his shooter, Curtis Walker, mistook as that of a rival gang member. He was shot in the back, in the parking lot of a 7-11.

Ayanna, along with her husband, Louis, founded the Alajawan Brown Foundation – intent on honoring his spirit by providing scholarships and other resources to children and youth in their community. Transforming their horror into hope.

In the interview, Ayanna says, "... when everybody else is sleeping and resting, I'm crying. And the madder I get at him the more I do for my baby. So I keep converting what could be my hurt."

Tonya Mosley asks Ayanna, "And when you say him, you're talking about?"

"My baby's killer."

"The person who killed your son?"

"Mm-hmm. I allow what could be my hate for him. I convert that into my love for my baby. And so since both of those are never-ending sources – I hate for him, I love for him – as long as I'm alive, this work will continue."

I keep converting what could be my hate and my hurt.

It's such a powerful expression of spiritual resilience, and I was struck as I heard the interview by that image of converting something that only leads to hurt and harm into something that instead enables help and healing.

Swords into plowshares. Spears into pruning hooks.

That's what Isaiah's talking about in our reading this morning. Isaiah is quoted in the Greek scriptures more than any other source from the Hebrew scriptures, presumably because of the compelling, hope-filled vision it offers of a NEW way. A NEW world forged out of the old one.

It's easy to hear Isaiah's famous vision, which is echoed by the prophet Micah, as a clear and specific call, a divine call, to peacemaking, to nonviolence: "God shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; 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."

It IS an incredibly compelling vision, of light cast into a world of darkness and injustice, in Isaiah's time, and cast again, STILL, into a world today that so often seems to be teaching and learning nothing but war and violence. That beats plowshares into swords

and pruning hooks into spears, as the prophet Joel describes in an ironic reversal of this vision from Isaiah and Micah. It is precisely such darkness into which Isaiah's vision is cast.

You may be familiar with the work of RAWtools, a national organization founded by former Mennonite pastor, Mike Martin. It's based in Colorado Springs – site, as it happens, of last weekend's mass shooting at an LGBTQ nightclub.

As of last month, RAWtools now has a location in Philly, in Kensington. Founded by longtime Christian activist Shane Claiborne.

Their mission is to “disarm hearts and forge peace” by “offering resources, skills and practices to handle conflict in creative ways, both as violence prevention and as healing processes after violence occurs.”

Within that mission, and in light of the national disgrace we know all too well that sees more than 100 people a day lose their lives to gun violence, RAWtools also takes donated guns, disables them and repurposes them as garden tools.

That process alone is a profoundly powerful and hopeful visual aid to portray the divine call to peacemaking and nonviolence. To healing and restoration. To forge a new world out of the old one.

And while I believe Isaiah's vision is very much a specific call to peacemaking and nonviolence, I'm hearing it this time, for the first time, as much more than that.

Not just a metaphor for repurposing death-dealing weapons into life-nurturing tools, but a metaphor for converting – CONVERTING – anything that COULD be our hate or our hurt, as Ayanna Brown suggests, OR anything, including our own hearts and minds, that has caused or is causing HARM to ourselves or each other or the planet, INTO something that instead nurtures HEALING and WHOLENESS. And in the spirit of this Advent season of expectant waiting, HOPE.

Hope that a new world is not only possible, it's coming! And we – each of us, all of us – play a critical part in enabling it to come more fully.

The 12th-century theologian, Bernard of Clairvaux, described “three Advents.” Three arrivals.

The first was the Incarnation itself, the arrival of Jesus and the Advent we celebrate each year leading us to Christmas. The last was the imagined and apocalyptic “Parousia,” the Second Coming, the Final Judgment; the imagined return of the risen Christ and the Advent to come at the end of time.

That’s the scene we find in Matthew’s gospel this morning, emphasizing the need to be ready. Always ready. Not just sitting back and passively waiting for something to happen, for someone to come, but ACTIVELY waiting by helping to prepare THE WAY. Waiting for the light of love to come by keeping our own light of love burning.

The second Advent, the middle Advent between those two, speaks to the part we play. It was described as the everyday arrival of Jesus, the Jesus we see and know in the lost and the least. In the hungry child and the weary migrant. In the grieving widow and exploited worker. In the pillaged planet.

“... just as you did to one of the least of these who are members of my family,” Jesus says in the next chapter in Matthew, “you did it to me.”

“... just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.”

Life is lived for us in this middle Advent, through the ways we love – or don’t. The new world is forged in this middle Advent, in the here and now, on earth as it is in heaven, through the ways we love – or DON’T – the lost and the least. Like God does, like Jesus did. Through the ways we love each other as ourselves. The earth as ourselves.

Spencer LaJoye’s song, “Plowshare Prayer,” continues:

*I pray that your body gets all that it needs
and if you don’t want healing, I just pray for peace
I pray that your burden gets lighter each day
I pray the mean voice in your head goes away
I pray that you honor the grief as it comes
I pray you can feel all the life in your lungs
I pray that if you go all day being brave*

*that you can go home, go to bed feeling safe
I pray you're forgiven, I pray you forgive
I pray you set boundaries and openly live
I pray that you feel you are worth never leaving I pray that you know I will always
believe you
I pray that you're heard
and I pray that this works*

Matthew's apocalyptic insistence on readiness and preparation, on keeping awake and alert, is not about fearing the future but embracing the present. It's not about living in fear of some imagined final Advent, but living, with increased urgency and purpose, in our love for God, and each other as ourselves. Right here and right now.

A hope-fueled love that compels us to beat our individual and collective swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks however we can. That is Isaiah's divine vision. That is the kind of active waiting and preparation to which we are called during Advent. Making way for THE WAY of love to come.

What might the new world, a new church, look like, if, for example, we converted theology, doctrine, the Bible, from weapons of fear and hate and discrimination into instruments of love and inclusion?

What might the new world look like if we converted conformity into creativity and authenticity?

What might the new world look like if we converted retribution into restoration?
Judgment into curiosity?

Competition into cooperation, and individual gain into common good?

Profit-hoarding into profit-sharing, people-serving, planet-sustaining?

Nationalism into internationalism and patriotism? Border walls into community bridges?

Domination of the earth into dominion over and care for all creation?

Charity into justice?

What might the world look like if we LIVED OUT our plowshares prayers? If we went beyond mere thoughts and prayers and took seriously our responsibility to both literally and figuratively beat our swords into plowshares?

As one commentary puts it in describing the Advent season, "Jesus comes to us again and again, calling us, inviting us to help repair the world (the Hebrew, tikkun olam), little by little, a thousand swords remade into a thousand plowshares."

A thousand swords remade into a thousand plowshares. Imagine.

The "Plowshare Prayer" song ends like this:

*Amen on behalf of the last and the least
On behalf of the anxious, depressed, and unseen
Amen for the workers, the hungry, the houseless
Amen for the lonely and recently spouseless
Amen for the queers and their closeted peers
Amen for the bullied who hold in their tears
Amen for the mothers of little Black sons
Amen for the kids who grow up scared of guns
Amen for the addicts, the ashamed and hungover
Amen for the calloused, the wisened, the sober
Amen for the ones who want life to be over
Amen for the leaders who lose their composure
Amen for the parents who just lost their baby
Amen for the chronically ill and disabled
Amen for the children down at the border
Amen for the victims of our law and order
I pray that you're heard and I pray that this works
I pray if a prayer has been used as a sword against you and your heart, against
you and your word
I pray that this prayer is a plowshare, of sorts*

Converting hurt and harm into healing and wholeness. Fear and hate into love. Swords into plowshares. Prayers into action.

May it be so.