

SERMON TITLE: “Seek Peace for the Whole World”

TEXT: Isaiah 2:1-5

PREACHED AT: Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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A few years ago, I came across an article called “This is Your Life (and How You Tell It) in the *New York Times*.¹ The article was focused on the stories we tell about our own lives—about how our brains seem to be hard-wired to construct narratives and understand ourselves as part of them.

In particular, psychologists were discovering the importance of *redemptive narratives* for mental health and well-being and for constructing an adequate understanding of personal identity. People seem to have an innate need to integrate themselves into a larger a story of progress, optimism, and improvement.

Researchers found strong correlations between the content of people’s current lives and the stories they told about themselves. Those who consistently had mood problems and struggled in life tended to focus on the darker dimensions of their life experiences.

The articles says:

By contrast, so-called generative adults — those who score highly on tests measuring civic-mindedness, and who are likely to be energetic and involved — tend to see many of the events in their life in the reverse order, as linked by themes of redemption. They flunked sixth grade but met a wonderful counselor and made honor roll in seventh. They were laid low by divorce, only to meet a wonderful new partner.²

Healthy people, the research seems to suggest, have hope on the horizon.

What is true for individuals is true for families, for communities, for churches, for nations, and beyond.

Last Sunday, we got a good example of this at the closing ceremonies of the London 2012 Olympic Games.

Perhaps some of you thought you would never *live* to see the day when John Lennon was played in church. Perhaps some of you hoped you would never see the day.

¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/22/health/psychology/22narr.html?_r=1&8dpc

² Ibid.

Well, whether you see this as an occasion for mourning or rejoicing, that day is here ☺. I'm going to play just a short clip of John Lennon's "Imagine" from last Sunday's closing ceremony.

"Imagine" video clip (1:50)

Imagine!

No heaven, no hell, people living only for today...

Imagine!

No countries, nothing to kill or die for, no religion...

Imagine!

People living life in peace... The world as one.

What John Lennon is doing in this song is setting forth a narrative of redemption—a narrative that has rid itself of religion and the afterlife, but which locates himself and his hearers in a story of optimism and hope.

He is asking us to imagine a world with none of the boundaries that we use to divide ourselves. A world of peace for all.

Of course, this is the narrative of the Olympics as well, isn't it?

It is a narrative of world peace, of human cooperation and unity and equality (racial, gender, etc).

I think that there is a reason why the Olympics are so immensely popular—a reason that goes beyond sport.

It is because these games are marketed to viewers in such a way that it makes us feel like we are a part of something that is big, something important, something profoundly good and hopeful.

(Of course, this is the "official" narrative of the Olympics. Critics would say that other narratives could be told as well—narratives of corruption, excess, capitalism, narratives that perpetuate racial stereotypes, etc. Some feel that the "official" narrative of the Olympics is very different from the reality on the ground... But that's a sermon for another day ☺.)

But the point is, whether in our own individual lives or at the much larger level of the whole world, we have this instinctual need and hunger for a good story to be a part of.

John Lennon and the Olympic spirit offer one such story.

Our text from Isaiah offers another one.

It is a beautiful passage with a number of truly beautiful images:

- all nations streaming to the mountain of the Lord (2:2)
- God judging justly between the nations
- swords being beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks
- no more war

It is a vision of peace, justice, and unity. It is a vision that most of us intuitively long for.

Can we imagine this? *No more war?!*

Can we imagine this for places like Syria and Afghanistan and Iraq and Egypt and Israel and the blood-soaked drug-fuelled battlegrounds of Colombia, Mexico, and El Salvador?

Can we imagine fruitful fields instead of checkpoints and walls and barbed wire?

Can we imagine resources going to things like healthcare and education and the arts and literacy programs and the beautification of cities and towns around the world, instead of to the machinery of war and “national security?”

Can we the imagine truth and beauty and worship of the one true God that is not corrupted and contaminated by all of our competing interests, all of our ethnic and religious differences?

Can we imagine the love of God and neighbour that is not motivated by fear or duty or self-interest?

Can we imagine people—*all kinds* of people—streaming toward the house of the Lord in celebration of justice, harmony, *shalom*?

This is the vision Isaiah sets in front of the people of Israel. This is what he asks them to imagine. This is the narrative of hope and redemption he urges them to understand themselves and live by.

But Isaiah does more than ask the people of Israel to imagine.

As always, it is important to note the broader context in which this vision of hope is located.

As is usually the case with Israel's prophets, there is good news and there is bad news.

We have already seen the good news. God's future is coming and it is going to be glorious.

The bad news is that Isaiah's vision of the Mountain of the Lord takes place in the context of judgment, sin, and disobedience.

This vision does not come via a well-choreographed lavish spectacle in a modern Olympic stadium; it does not come via bumper stickers or T-shirts or Facebook pages to "like" or pop stars looking for a cause to brand themselves with in order to sell more records.

Rather, this vision of peace comes sandwiched between severe judgments upon Israel's behaviour and dire warnings of impending doom and exile.

All around this vision of peace, in chapters 1-2 of Isaiah, we read of the threefold failure of Israel:

- **Lack of trust in Yahweh:** 1:4—"have forsaken the Lord, who have despised the Holy One of Israel.
- **Constant flirtation with idols:** 2:8—"their land is filled with idols; they bow down to the work of their hands.
- **Failure to pursue social justice:** 1:17—"learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow; 1:27—"Zion shall be redeemed by justice, and those in her who repent, by righteousness"

Isaiah's vision of peace for the whole world does not come as a nice fairy tale to get us through the day, nor as a generic utopia that we are invited to passively wait for and which demands nothing of us.

It is part of a bracing call to the people of God to start acting like the people of God.

Go back and read Isaiah 1 this afternoon. It is pretty harsh stuff. God is said to hate all of Israel's sacrifices and religious festivals when they are accompanied for a disregard for the poor and a failure to pursue justice for the oppressed. I can imagine that these festivals and celebrations said all the right things about who God was and what God would do. But they were not accompanied by action.

We can imagine, certainly. But we are invited to do more than this. We are invited to creatively participate in and pursue the future of peace for all that God is bringing.

Imagine, yes. But, more importantly, follow and obey.

Imagine a future of peace for the world, certainly. But, perhaps more importantly, work for that peace *now*.

How?

We can, as an MCC worker in Colombia reminded us during our tour in April, “amplify the voices of those not currently being heard.”

We can consider if and how we might be complicit in the problems that fuel violence around the world.

We can ask, if and how our habits and patterns of consumption might contribute to global inequality and injustice.

We can consider if and how we might hold views that contribute to damaging stereotypes of others.

We can, with humility and respect, introduce people to Jesus and his gospel of peace at every opportunity.

We can do these and many other things. The important lesson from Isaiah is that we must always ask ourselves two questions:

1. What is the vision of the future toward which my story and the story of the world is moving?
2. How is my behaviour in the present hastening or hindering that future?

Throughout this summer series, we have been looking at how we can seek and pursue peace in a wide variety of domains of life and in a wide variety of ways.

It is important to note that in each case we are seeking and pursuing something that the world has never seen before.

Our world has *never* known peace. For as long as there have been people on this planet, there has been conflict.

Seeking and pursuing peace for the whole world is an exercise in imagination and obedience into a world that has never been.

Some see this as negative. Anabaptists and Mennonites have always been criticized for having a theology that was “too idealistic.”

“Yes, yes, world peace is all fine and good,” they say, “but things don’t work that way in the real world.”

I have read countless books and articles that make something like this point.

But part of me wants to respond, “*Who cares what is realistic?!*”

This past week, someone drew my attention to an article in the June 2012 issue of *Canadian Geographic* called “Dr. Sustainability,” It addresses the construction of an environmentally sustainable building on the University of British Columbia campus that

Quote from the article:

It seems almost imaginary, the idea of buildings as net contributors to the environment in the ecological and human ways that comprise Robinson’s “regenerative sustainability.” But even the use of the word “imaginary” wouldn’t faze Dr. Sustainability. “One of my students,” he says with a smile, “a guy with two degrees in piano performance, who runs an art festival in Newfoundland where they do nature appreciation during the day and concertos at night, says that maybe the challenge of sustainability isn’t to prove the world more real... but to prove the world more imaginary.

Robinson lets the remark set in, then continues. “Because we don’t want this world!” he says, gesturing widely. “We want a world that doesn’t yet exist.

So did the people of Israel in Isaiah’s day. So do we in our day. We want a world that doesn’t yet exist.

And God, in his mercy, has promised both to bring this world into being, to work with human decisions in doing so, and to mold and shape his people in the process.

This is how it is in the story of Scripture and in the life of faith. We are not given isolated, idyllic pictures of a future of world peace for which our only task is to passively wait and admire its beauty.

We are always participants in the future that is coming. We are always invited into aligning our own lives with the future God is bringing about.

Or not. The choice is ours.

May God give us God-sized imaginations for a future of peace for the whole world. And may God also give us God-fuelled energy and devotion to participate in this “unrealistic” and “unattainable” future right now, in whatever ways we are able.

Amen.