

The First Reading is from Isaiah 2:1-4

¹The word that Isaiah son of Amoz
saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

²In days to come
the mountain of the LORD's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.

³ Many peoples 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.

⁴ He 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.

The Second Reading is from Luke 1:67-79

Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

⁶⁸ "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for God has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.

⁶⁹ The Lord has raised up a mighty savior for us
in the house of his servant David,

⁷⁰ as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,

⁷¹ that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

⁷² Thus God has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,

⁷³ the oath that God swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us ⁷⁴ that we,
being rescued from the hands of our enemies,

might serve God without fear, ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;

for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins.

⁷⁸ By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,

⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace."

The Message is entitled *Peace Mends*.

“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 anymore.” For by the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light... in [our] darkness...[and] to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

On this Second Sunday of Advent the Candle of Peace has been set aflame. Yet, does this word reflect the condition of your heart this day? Are you at peace? Are you living into this way of peace in the midst of this oft over busy season? Are you an instrument of God’s peace wherever you go?

Listen to the beginnings of a fable entitled, *Six Crows*, written by Leo Lionni. **“In a peaceful valley at the foot of the Balabadur Hills a farmer cultivated a field of wheat. The soil was fertile and the spring rains had been gentle. Life would have been good and happy were it not for six noisy crows who nested in a tree nearby.”**

The farmer’s life was not good and happy, for the introduction sets the stage of the fable: “... were it not for the crows.” The farmer had an annoyance in his life. What about you? Maybe it’s not crows, but something or someone else. Why is your life not good and happy?

When I think of the farmers, who tilled the land in this region with field after field of citrus groves, I wonder what possibly made their lives not good and happy. Could it have been the ever-present possibility of a freeze during the winter months. Smudge pots used to stand ready to warm the groves as they pelted black soot into the air, which eventually coated the insides of our organ’s pipes until they were cleaned some years back. The citrus fruit fly was another pest that could have made for a not so good and happy life for farmers, let alone the economic pressures of an ever-changing world.

But, I don’t think our local farmers are the only ones who should answer this question; so how would you fill in the blank? How would your life be good and happy for you, if only it were not for...? If only our cities were rid of those without homes, if only that accident did not happen, if only crime would end, if only illnesses from flus to cancers wouldn’t invade our bodies, if only relationships wouldn’t fracture, if only our political persuasion would always be in control, if only I could get a promotion, if only I could get a job, if only death could be no more. For the farmer in our fable, his nemeses were the crows. If only it were not for the crows. Life would be good and happy without crows, but maybe you’re wondering why. Let me continue the fable.

“Just when the wheat was about to ripen, the crows descended upon the field and pecked away at the tender grains. The farmer tried to chase the crows from the field. But no sooner had he returned to his hut than they were back. In desperation he built a scarecrow.”

In desperation what do you build? Do you build walls of separation to provide protection? Do you fill your life with distractions? Do you hide under a metaphorical blanket, hoping it will just go away? Do you fight back and rail against whatever it is that is threatening your happiness?

“When the crows saw scarecrow standing the wheat, waving a big stick, they were frightened. They huddled in their tree and wondered what to do. ‘We must scare that thing away!’ They said, ‘But how?’ ‘Let’s set the field on fire!’ shouted a crow.

Have you ever done this, not literally but figuratively? Have you ever set a situation ablaze just to get your point across or to show someone who is really in charge? It seems that

our instant communication via tweets and texts are excellent sources of ignition these days, as hurtful and destructive words easily cascade from our finger tips. People seem to feel emboldened to speak their particular brand of truth from the anonymity of their keyboards with ease. Of course, some freely do it in person, like the hate we have seen spewed via videos capturing blatant escalations in public or private situations. It seems that when our livelihood is threatened or when our reputations or egos are threatened, fires ignite.

“Let’s set the field on fire!’ Shouted a crow.” Luckily some of the crows realized this wasn’t the best answer for the fable continues, **“But that would end our wheat!’ the others said. There were many proposals. At last they agreed to make a ferocious kite. They gathered bark and dry leaves and made a fierce and very ugly bird. The next morning, the crows flew the kite over the field.**

The scarecrow didn’t budge, but the farmer was very frightened. He ran into his hut and bolted the door tight. ‘I must build a scarier scarecrow,’ he said. Soon a giant figure brandishing two swords stood in the wheat field. Its angry mouth seemed to grunt. ‘That should do it,’ said the farmer.

But when the crows saw the new menace, they gathered more bark and more leaves and built an even larger and more ferocious kite. They flew it over the field. Back and forth. The farmer was so scared that he didn’t dare leave his hut.”

Isn’t this what we do too? Fear overwhelms us as violence of wild proportions is used to combat violence of wild proportions? When we think of our human military history, don’t we just keep building weapons that are more destructive... from rocks to arrows, arrows to single shot guns, from six shooters to assault rifles; from dynamite to atomic bombs, from poisons to nerve gas to airborne chemical warfare.

Like the farmer and the crows, humanity continually thinks of bigger and scarier weapons in order to get its way in the world, all the while putting at risk the very planet that sustains life... **“Let’s set the field afire,’ said one crow.”**

Wendell Berry, an American novelist, poet, environmental activist, cultural critic, and farmer reminds us of the futility of this methodology: **“If deadly violence can in fact stop deadly violence, then why has deadly violence not stopped?”**

Why has deadly violence not stopped? Why haven’t we beat our weapons into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks? Why haven’t we stopped learning war?

Fortunately, the fable is not finished yet: **“From her nest in an old tree trunk an owl had been watching the goings on. She shook her head. ‘I don’t know who is sillier, the farmer or the crows,’ she thought. When the owl noticed that the wheat was wilting from neglect, she decided to talk to the farmer. ‘Why don’t you make peace, you and the crows,’ she said.**

‘It’s too late now,’ said the farmer angrily.

‘It’s never too late to talk things over,’ said the owl.”

Did you hear that? It is never too late to talk things over. It is never too late to set your feet on the way of peace. Is there someone you need to talk things over with? Is there a long held grudge or deep resentment that needs to be reconciled? Is there a simmering anger that needs resolve? It is never too late to talk things over, my friends.

“Then the owl went to see the crows. ‘What can we do now? said the crows, [for they were] dismayed [when] they heard that the wheat crop was in danger.

‘Go and talk things over,’ said the owl. ‘Words can do magic.”

Words can do magic, yet we all know that words can be good or bad, for words can hurt as well as heal. Words can incite violence or cultivate peace.

I wonder if we understand the power of our words? This past week, as our nation has remembered former president George H.W. Bush, what struck me the most were the stories shared about his friendships across political divides. People spoke of his ability to seek understanding and to form friendships with people of diverse political persuasions. He modeled for us dialogue that created bonds rather than divisions, dialogue that created understanding rather than animosity.

As columnist Ashley Pratt wrote, "As humans, we all have different experiences that bring value to the conversations and relationships we have with one another. We crave connection, but only befriending people who always agree with us is dull, and it doesn't lead us to the colorful lives we all profess to want. And while you should never compromise your own values, you can still respect the thinking and experiences behind someone else's." George H.W. Bush modeled this for our nation. He modeled dialogue guided by the way of peace.

"The crows and farmer agreed to meet near the owl's nest. While the owl looked on they talked and talked. First in anger, then more reasonably, finally like old friends. 'I must confess that I missed your happy cackling,' said the farmer. 'And we missed your wheat!' said the crows. Soon they were laughing together. 'We must thank the owl,' said the farmer. 'But, where is she?' Her nest was empty. They looked all over. They went to the field. There stood the giant scarecrow but something was different. The nasty grin had turned into a happy smile. The owl was perched on the giant's arm. 'What happened?' they asked. 'Magic,' said the owl, 'Magic!'"

Yet, this magic takes willingness, vulnerability and sustained effort. Peace doesn't just happen. Notice that at first there was anger when the farmer and the crows came together. Anger is not wrong in and of itself, for anger can propel us to act. But, will our anger propel us to act justly? Will our anger or hurt compel us to do the difficult work of reconciliation?

The reason we are at war with one another as well as nation against nation, is because war is easier than the way of peace. War allows us to say I am right and you are wrong, without ever seeking to understand the other.

Ashley Pratt continues her commentary on our national situation today, writing, "Instead of a willingness to learn from and engage with one another, too many of us view those on the opposite side of the political spectrum as a threat to the country, which is completely dangerous. If we are unable to have a respectful dialogue and to be challenged by differing viewpoints, then we cannot advance our society as a whole."

Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke a prophecy about his son to be, "You, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way..." prepare for the one called the Prince of Peace.

Are you inviting the Holy Spirit to guide your feet into the way of peace? The way of peace that is possible even in the most difficult of life circumstances.

A few years back I attended a class on Howard Thurman, the author of our poem that is guiding our Advent Season, at a conference. The presenters were women who had been schooled in non-violent response to violence. They were women of color, one who shared about the training she received to prepare for the racial hatred she would face during those turbulent 50's and 60's. She spoke of learning how not to respond angrily or violently to racial

slurs and hatred being spewed at her and she vividly recalled the one time a trainer actually spit on her as part of the training. She had trained her feet in the way of peace and she was able to live into it. I was incredibly humbled by the immensity of effort she went through to prepare herself.

As followers of the Prince of Peace, how do we school ourselves in the way of peace? Are we willing to be trained? Are we willing to do the difficult work of peace, not only personally, but communally? By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, for our power to live into the way of peace comes from God alone. Will we trust that God's ways just might be more life giving than our ways?

"If deadly violence can in fact stop deadly violence, then why has deadly violence not stopped?" Friends, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD; that the LORD may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths, the path of peace." The way of peace is the only to actively participate in mending God's beautiful creation. The work of Christmas begins now... to bring peace among us. Yes, peace mends, yet the work of peace is hard. Will we recommit to being instruments of God's peace by the power of the Holy Spirit at work within us? I pray so. Amen.