

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL  
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**  
**Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk**  
(Delivered on Sunday, November 27, 2016)

Text:

**Isaiah 2:1-5 (NRSV)**

This is what Isaiah ben-Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem:

In the last days, the mountain of Yahweh's Temple will be established as the most important mountain and raised above all other hills—all nations will stream toward it. Many people will come and say: "Come, let us climb Yahweh's mountain to the Temple of the God of Jacob, that we may be instructed in God's ways and walk in God's path." Instruction will be given from Zion and the word of Yahweh from Jerusalem. God will judge between the nations and render decisions for many countries. They will beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; one nation will not raise the sword against another, and never again will they train for war.

O house of Leah and Rachel and Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of Yahweh!

Reflections by Pastor Donald: **"Waiting and Hoping for Peace"**

***Peace!*** (making the sign of peace)

the normal, nonwarring condition of a nation, group of nations, or the world.

***Peace in our time, o Lord, to all the people's peace.*** (sung)

a state of mutual harmony between people or groups, especially in personal relations

***All we are saying, is give peace a chance.*** (sung)

cessation of or freedom from any strife or dissension.

***Peace out!*** (making the sign with a chest pound)

Peace, that which humanity has longed for since Cain slay Able. Peace, that which makes glad the heart and keeps the dishes from being thrown at the Thanksgiving table. Peace, that sensation that calms the body, eases the mind, and gives serenity to the soul.

Throughout our long and often bloody history as humans, we have yearned for peace. And yet, even now, or especially now it seems so unattainable, so far away so outside our reach.

How many times have I shed tears over the extraordinary tragedies occurring daily in Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia and far too often on the streets of America, especially here in the City of Angels? Where is this longed for peace? Where are those pruning shears in place of guns? Is peace

even possible among people who disagree and hold very different ideas of what a self-evident truth is?

Looking at the words of Isaiah which Lester read for us so well and were written all those centuries ago for a people consumed with war and persecuted from every side, I can only imagine that the prophet's assurances that their swords as well as their enemy's would someday be turned into plows to furrow the earth instead of, quite literally, another's brow, or that everyone's deadly spears would be turned into garden implements to clip little tree branches seemed as impossible to believe then as complete peace among all the world's people seems to us living now in this 21st century.

And yet... they DID hope. They DID pray, they DID seek. They worked for peace and longed for it then as much, if not more, as we do now.

And perhaps it is in this very hoping, this very believing, this very longing and waiting and working for peace that brings it about in hearts and minds in ways we can't see and may never understand or tangibly experience. Maybe it's the peace we show to one another right here in our tiny church community and those closest to us that makes the difference in propagating peace to the community around us. Perhaps it's the peace we foster in our families, our friendships and our intimate relationships that fills the pitcher of peace until it's tipping point where it spills over and covers all things living so that the wolf shall live with the lamb and the leopard with the young goat and allow a little child who is coming soon to lead us.

"If you assume that there is no hope, you guarantee that there will be no hope," the great Noam Chomsky once said as he exhorted us to exercise our freedom to believe that there are opportunities to change things and grab hold of the possibility that we, "can contribute to making a better world."

As we enter this season of Advent, once again looking towards the birth of the One who will bring ultimate peace, I encourage you to let this hope stir within you. Realize anew that the One who knows our ultimate destiny promises us everlasting peace and the hope for a better world.

Know that prayers are answered. Affirm that each of us has the possibility to change our thinking and even our destructive thoughts towards ourselves and others. Remember that even teeny-tiny and miserly Grinch hearts can be turned into chest-bursting big ones, and enable us to start giving back and begin giving forward.

This kind of peace, of course, doesn't come just from WISHING for it, or HOPING it will happen. It takes conscious effort. It takes being present to what God is asking us to do to bring about peace. It's not just singing, but believing that peace surely must begin with me and with you. It means realizing that we must take each moment and live each moment IN peace to CREATE peace. It means a willingness to let go of our own egos and how right we just KNOW we are. It's taking the time to breathe deeply when we're confronted or provoked so that we may truly hear what another is saying and, more importantly, feel the pain, understand the trauma, and be willing to walk in that person's shoes to know where he or she is coming from and why peace seems so elusive now and maybe forever to this infuriated and infuriating person in front of you.

"At the beginning of a new church year," our UCC theologian, Kate Huey writes, "we dare to hope for something much better than the news may report. We begin a new time remembering who is really in charge of everything, and setting our hearts on being part of this One's plan. As beautiful as these verses (we've heard) are, they paint a very clear picture: God is the One who brings this dream to reality, but there's work for us to do, too, in re-shaping the instruments of war, violence, and destruction into instruments of peace and provision for all."

"The hardest call for us to answer may be in each individual heart, rather than focusing only on the larger world of politics and nations (not that those aren't important, especially now)," she writes in another reflection on this passage. "It is so easy, so human, for our hearts to grow entangled with

petty resentments and even larger hatreds, born of frustration and disillusionment. We find it a tremendous challenge to move through times of discouragement and even oppression without losing our souls to such terrible wrongs, such powerful impediments to peace. And we have to ask, what are the "little investments" we protect?

"...During this season of Advent, for the sake of peace, we can take real, concrete steps to heal division, alienation, and broken relationship in our family, our community, and the world, if we have the courage to do so. Beginning with just one step, one relationship, perhaps one apology or offer of peace, we need to believe that we can be part of God's dream."

Our brothers and sisters participating in 12-Step programs know the power of the 4th step, often one of the most dreaded in the program, because it requires that one take a "searching and fearless moral inventory" of oneself.

In this season of Advent, maybe we could take a page out of the 12-step book as it relates to our own lives and take an inventory of whether there are apologies that need to be made, relationships that need to be healed, and offers of peace that could be given that may lead to healing and the peaceable kin-dom God wants us to envision and help create.

"Paying attention is one of the main Advent themes," Rev. Melissa Bane Sevier wrote in her article, "Watchful" this week, and I think it's a good way to end these reflections as we each reflect on the things God would have us pay attention to in order to bring peace to our lives and the lives of those around us.

"Pay attention to the people closest to you. How will you give and receive love in those relationships?"

Pay attention to the people you encounter. How might your interactions aim toward being holy moments?

Pay attention to the people least like you. This may be more difficult, but how will you learn from them?

Pay attention to God and to what God is doing in the world. How can you awaken your senses to notice goodness and peace?

Pay attention to yourself. Self-awareness is highly underrated. How will you be awake to your body, soul, spirit, and values during Advent? How will that self-awareness translate into how you spend your time?"

Let us pray...

God takes all that we are, and all our world has become, and reshapes our fear, cynicism, worry, and anger into peace, hope, joy, and love. For God knows that in everything something new can appear. Our weapons of destruction can become tools of fruitfulness, our cynical minds can become fertile with hope,

our anxious hearts can become filled with your joy, our words of hurt can become acts of love. This is the power of God's love among us and we are remolded, reshaped, re-created by God's own hand. Praise be to you, O God. Amen.