FMC November 27, 2022

Barbara Ewy

A Spoon Full of Hope

 It’s just a simple spoon…light weight, no ornamentation, cold to the touch, slightly rough. But if we knew its story, we would hear of cluster bombs dropped by American planes on Laotian villages over forty years ago. Bombies, about the size of a fist, are the remnants of these cluster bombs. Beginning in the late 1970’s, villagers began collecting these fragments and melting them down, turning them into spoons and later, other useful items that they could use or sell. But the first spoons were made simply because the people needed them; they had none in their homes. This is one such spoon, a utensil that sustains daily life transformed from a life destroying weapon that brought only destruction and heartbreak.

 During this Advent season as we prepare for Christmas, we are thinking about restoration. In “faith” terms, restoration has to do with putting things right, bringing the world back in tune with God’s plans and vision. It is a process, a transformation that doesn’t happen all at once, but gradually, over time, as God is at work in all of creation. Isaiah chapter 2 verse 4 gives us a picture of what that looks like: “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 prophet Micah, in chapter 4, offers us a parallel passage that ends with these words, “they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken.”

 This is a vison of a world where greed and amassed wealth has no place, a world where each person, each family, has what they need, a world where disputes are solved by looking to God for what is right, a world where the divisions of race, culture, national boundaries, differences of all sorts do not separate people or elevate some at the expense of others. In such a world people do not need weapons, nor do they need to learn the strategies and tactics of war. It is a just world, not in terms of vengeance or even punishment, but in terms of putting things right, of people living in harmony with each other, with God, and with creation itself.

 In the Believer’s Bible Commentary on Isaiah, Ivan Friesen writes, “In a world familiar with terror and war, Isaiah’s vision of a peaceable planet is astonishing. It calls people and nations to a new order of human existence. The vision is situated as a preface to the appalling scene of human perfidy that follows it, as if to say that only such a vision offers a hopeful alternative to human treachery.”

 Indeed, Isaiah chapter 2, verses 1 to 5, lies between the indictment of Judah’s wickedness and the pronouncement of judgement on Judah’s arrogance. In Isaiah chapter 1 verse 15, the Lord declares, “When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood.” Chapter 2 verses 7 through 9 describe it this way, “Their land is filled with silver and gold, and there is no end to their treasures, their land is filled with horses, and there is no end to their chariots. Their land is filled with idols; they bow down to the work of their hands, to what their own fingers have made; And so people are humbled and everyone is brought low—do not forgive them!” It is a picture of economic inequality sustained by the power of weapons and the exaltation of objects in place of obedience and loyalty to God.

 In addition to its own internal problems, Judah faced threats from abroad. Isaiah, son of Amoz wrote to a nation whose future was uncertain. The Northern Kingdom of Israel had fallen to the Assyrian army. The future of Judah and the southern kingdom also lay in doubt, threatened by the same foreign armies. Jerusalem itself fell under siege. It was a time of anxiety, hardship, and suffering. Isaiah’s vision of a peaceable kingdom must have felt like a fairy tale, unreachable, imaginary, a bit like Dorothy’s idea of a land over the rainbow when she was still in Kansas, in the movie The Wizard of Oz.

 Perhaps it seems so also to us. We live in a time of uncertainty. We are wealthy, or at least well off, by the world’s standards. Most of the time we live comfortable lives. But we also experience the deep divisions in our society. Sometimes we don’t even know how to talk to our neighbors, to our family members who believe differently. We worry about the state of our democracy. We care about the war in Ukraine and worry about the nuclear threats that are made. Our nation is known for its military and defense spending, ranking number 1 in the world in 2020, spending $778 Billion, which is more than the next nine highest combined, which added up to $703.6 billion. Yet our cities are plagued by gang violence. We hear of a shooting or other violence nearly every day on the evening news. Mass shootings seem to come in waves. Most recently we mourn the victims of the mass shooting in the LBGTQ bar in Colorado and the Walmart in Virginia. This year alone our nation has experienced more than 600 mass shootings, nearly double the number just five years ago. What does Isaiah’s vision mean to us?

 I have long loved the beauty of this passage and others similar, particularly as they are read in preparation for Christmas. But I’m not sure I have often connected them with the reality that they came out of, the context provided by the surrounding chapters and the historical background. In that context, in light of Judah’s fallen state, these passages are invitational. The nations who stream to the mountain of the Lord become an example for Judah, for Judah who has known the Lord and yet fallen away from God’s ways. Verse 5 is both invitation and call to repent, “O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!”

 The call to repent asks Judah, and I believe us as well, to repent of the ways we support economics that prey on the vulnerable. It calls us to repent of our reliance on weapons to protect what we consider to be ours. It calls us to value the welfare of our neighbor, no matter how different the neighbor is from us. It calls for us to set aside our idols, whether they are assault weapons or money in the bank, nation or race or culture. Repentance calls us to set aside our arrogance, our power, our sense of control. Repentance asks us to walk humbly, knowing that all we have and all that we are, comes from God and belongs to our Creator.

 “Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord” invites us to walk with God, in relationship with God. We do not bring about the peaceable kingdom on our own, but we are invited to participate with God by living and acting in peacemaking ways. What acts of kindness can I show my neighbor whose political beliefs are vastly different than my own? How can I make peace with my brothers and sisters as we settle the estates of our elders? How can I show love to my brother or sister in the church whose theology is different from my own? How do I exercise my right to vote, in this country, so that my vote moves the marker toward justice instead of injustice? On a personal level, do my words tear down or build up? What changes in my life do I need to make in order to live in tune with God’s vision for this world?

 Isaiah’s words also give us a picture of a God who has not given up on Judah, even though Judah has not kept covenant with God. It gives us a picture of a God who cares, not only for Judah, but for the many nations and peoples of the world. This is not a God who set everything in motion and then walked away. This is a God who actively participates in the human story and continues to call people to follow and live as they were created to be. Nor is this a God who exercises power through weapons to make people do as God wishes. This is a God who teaches and instructs, who invites and who mourns when people walk away, allowing them to make that choice fully, including the dire consequences that come of it.

 In his sermon commentary on today’s text, Doug Bratt puts it this way: ”At the heart of our text….God insists that God refuses to desert us. God hasn’t abandoned even sinful people who freely choose to make swords and spears. God hasn’t abandoned people who still aim our nuclear missiles at each other. God hasn’t even abandoned people who let vines grow tangled and ground like fallow because we prefer making swords to plowshares and spears to pruning hooks. God won’t even abandon us to our own limited understanding of reality and vision for the future.”

 That brings me back to this spoon. At least 270 million bombies were dropped during the U.S. secret war in Laos. The bombing was so severe that Laos is considered the most bombed nation, per capita, in human history. More bombs were dropped in Laos in the ‘60s and ‘70s than in all of Europe during World War II. Even today, the threat of unexploded bombs makes farming dangerous. Clearing the land to farm is dangerous, but collecting the bombies for recycling is also dangerous work.

 In the village of Ban Napia, known for its spoon making and bombie recycling, a farmer named Khonpaserd lives with his wife and two daughters. He says, “Some years I make more money from spoons than I do from rice. I’ll be happy when the unexploded ordnances are gone though. I’d rather be safe and free of fear than have money….My daughters help out on weekends, but they go to school…during the week. They know how to make spoons, but I hope they never need to do the same.”

 “In 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. 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. 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.”

 May we find our hope in the Lord, looking to God to teach us right paths and lead us in the way that leads to life. “Come, people of God, let us walk in the light of the Lord!”