

Paradise-Turned Armageddon¹

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Isaiah 2:4 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.

Isaiah 11:6-10 ⁶ The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. ⁷ The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. ⁸ The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. ⁹ They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. ¹⁰ On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

It was a beautiful, sunny Saturday morning some weeks ago.

When I woke up and pulled up the curtain,

I felt strongly that

I needed to go jogging to refresh myself,

at least for the sake of the beautiful weather itself.

From my yet short life experience,

I knew that

a feeling of that kind was unusual for me

since I don't work out as much as I should.

I thought there must be some good reason for that good strong compulsion for jogging,

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so I put on some sport clothes
and started running toward a nearby State park.

It was such a beautiful day, as I said,
so, when I arrived at the park, breathing heavily,
I saw a dozen people already enjoying the shining sky
and warm environment of the park.

I stopped at the edge of a field,
sipped some water from the bottle I carried,
and started seeing, feeling, and enjoying the gentle warmth of the day myself.

In that peaceful park,
I saw two children throwing balls,
a mom and dad watching them playing,
a dog sniffing around the corner,
a fountain springing up in waterfall-like streams,
an artist drawing some girls on a canvas in a way
that nobody but he could decipher,
and a young couple walking down the road
talking about the baby they were expecting.

What a beautiful day and what a beautiful moment I was having in that park,
surrounded by the blue sky above and the grassy field all around!

But, strangely,
it was right at that moment,
I mean, right at that refreshing,
peaceful,
shining moment,
that a dark, gloomy, and deadening picture appeared to me.
I didn't know where it came from,
but it emerged right before my eyes
and, in a second,
the picture was so clear that I could see everything that was going on within it.

Please don't get me wrong.
I was not in a lunatic ecstasy,
but, as sure as I was standing there,
I was seeing something I hadn't intended to see.
In that doomed picture,
everything I had been seeing, feeling, and enjoying in that peaceful park was overturned.

The shining grass became a bloody battlefield,
the children throwing balls became soldiers throwing grenades,
the sniffing dog became an armored tank,
and the beautiful fountain springing up became a nuclear missile launching pad
on the fiery ground.

I was so shocked that I couldn't move or say anything.

When the image faded, I asked myself:

“Where did that horrifying image come from?”

Fortunately,

it wasn't long before I got the answer.

Those horrifying images came from

what I had seen from various war reports from Iraq and Afghanistan.

They were the exact images

that the reporters in Iraq and Afghanistan

brought to us from those battlefields every day.

Why do you think I had that doomed image of war

when I was so enjoying the shining blue sky in a gorgeous park?

That was my question, too, at that time.

I couldn't answer back then.

But now I know why.

The painful images of war appeared to me,

since the things in this world cannot be isolated from one another.

Even the most beautiful parts of this world,

like the gorgeous park I was in,

do not stand alone.

Everything is connected under one Creator we profess as God,

so even the worst image on earth,

like that of war,

is part of what we see in the tight, universal unity of the world.

Even further,

I have realized that

it may be our heavy duty to remember the worst of the world

even as we enjoy the best of the world,

just as I did in that beautiful park.

But again, we might ask, “Why?”

Yes, it may be that

everything in the world makes a universal unity under one Creator

and we have to remember the worst of the world as our heavy duty.

We admit that.

But, still, why?

The question may be better stated as:

why do we wage war, the most terrifying thing we can imagine?

Some weeks ago,

I was watching a television debate on the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

The panelists were discussing the root causes of the two wars.

One panelist said that

religious and cultural conflict is the root cause of the wars.

Another said that

obtaining crude oil and political control over the Middle East is the key cause of the wars.

And another said that

it was religious extremism and international terrorism.

Finally, an enthusiastic caller,

repeating Samuel Huntington's famous theory, said that

it was simply the inevitable clash of civilizations.

All of these possible answers and the careful analyses that led to them

orbit around us all the time

as we struggle to find *the* right answer.

But, the problem is that

no one is sure of the exact cause of wars,

despite those wonderful analyses,

because no single cause provokes any war.

However,

in all those analyses

we find one fundamental thing in common:

human beings' weakness in moral behavior,

and the corruption of their cultural or religious ideals against war.

Put simply,

we generally try to be moral and not violent in our ethical ideals and behavior,

but we often fail in this attempt.

And in our religious ideals,

we also try to keep peace with one another,

with other religions,

and with people of different skin colors, cultures, nations, ethnicities, and genders,

but we often find ourselves failing in that great religious pursuit as well.

I believe that this is why

the words of the former French President, Jacques Chirac, continue to echo in our ears.

He said,

“As far as I'm concerned, war always means failure.”

Therefore,

is it any wonder that we continuously ask and pray to God
to help us escape this great peril of human warfare?

It seems no wonder to me

because war means we have failed.

We ask and pray to God today just as Isaiah did
that nations “shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
[and] nation shall not lift up sword against nations
neither shall they learn war any more.”

Isaiah fervently prayed so

because he knew from his own experience the cruelty of war:
torture, murder, bombing, maiming, disease, and death!

The horrible products of human warfare!

Don't you know yourselves that

what Isaiah knew and experienced are happening today in Iraq and Afghanistan?

Sadly, already three hundred young Americans
have fallen in Afghanistan this year alone.

How terrible that is,

and how we grieve for them and their families!

So, we pray just like Isaiah.

“Please, good Lord, help us in this painful peril!”

We pray that over and over and over again. We must!

And I hope,

in that tearful prayer,

we will be able to hear what Isaiah heard in his own prayer to God:

⁶ The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. ⁷ The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.....⁹ They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

A great message of hope,

a liberating message of salvation,

and the wonderful message of peace!

Do you yourself hear this hopeful message speaking to your heart from Scripture today?

Do you hear this challenging message ringing from deep in your hearts

in your own prayers to God?

I believe when you do

that God is speaking to your mourning hearts

with this great news of hope, salvation, and peace.

I believe

this great message of hope

was what General McChrystal, the top commander in Afghanistan,

had in his mind when he spoke on CBS's *60 Minutes*.

He said that we will need a totally different strategy in Afghanistan.

So far,

our chief strategy has been killing our enemies.

But now, he said,

we need a strategy that defeats violent factions

by building relationships with and protecting the Afghan people

and by focusing on developing a competent

and honest government on which they can rely.

Do you hear what the general is saying to us?

He wants us to beat

our swords of destruction into the plowshares of reconstruction

and turn our spears of killing and bombing

into pruning hooks of peace, love, healing, and life.

That's the point....That's the point.

Dorothy Thompson,

the journalist expelled from Nazi Germany,

once said,

“Peace has to be created....It is the product of Faith, Strength, Energy, Will, Sympathy, Justice, Imagination, and the triumph of Principle. It will never be achieved by passivity and quietism.”

She knew that

peace is not just the absence of war

and invited us to faithfully act

for the peace and healing of the broken world,

just as General McChrystal advocates that great task of peace and love.

This is why

I invite all of you as well

to that special task of love and peace today,

by doing whatever small things we can do now.

Praying at home,

Writing letters to politicians,

Demonstrating (peacefully!) on the streets,

Joining and supporting anti-war groups,

And, finally, most importantly, loving our enemies as ourselves.

When we do so all together in one mind

and with one hope of peace,

I believe

the depressing vision I had at the park will be overturned again.

The bloody battlefield will again become the shining, grassy field,
the soldiers throwing grenades will again become the children throwing balls,
the armored tank in the sandy desert will again become the peaceful dog sniffing around,
and the nuclear missile launching pad on the fiery ground will again become the blessed
fountain beautifully springing up—Isaiah's
hopeful vision of peace!

I believe it.

Amen.