
Ploughshares and Pruning Hooks

Isaiah 2:1-5

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on November 28, 2010 by the Rev. Meghan Feldmeyer

When I was little, we would always get an Advent calendar this time of year. Advent calendars first came into fashion in the mid-1800s. There would usually be small pictures or Bible verses behind each panel that would allow a family to reflect on the Advent season together. It was a tool for learning and instruction about the hope and anticipation around the coming of Jesus. This is how it was used in our home. My sister and I would take turns opening the small door each day to see what colorful image lay behind it. It was a small thing, but there was always such anticipation and mystery around what would be behind each paper window. It truly captured some of the mystery and anticipation of the Advent season. I actually found the turn to chocolate Advent calendars much less interesting...they may have been high on taste, but they were low on meaningful content! If I were going to make an Advent calendar, I would most definitely argue that there should be an image of a ploughshare and a pruning hook behind one of the mystery windows. Because Isaiah's ploughshares and pruning hooks have something to teach us about Advent and the kingdom of God.

I'd like to invite you to take a moment and step back in time. Ancient Israel was a very different world from our own. The lives of the Israelites closely followed the rhythms and patterns of agricultural seasons. Life in ancient times involved working the land and praying for good weather. Most people had a small plot of family land to farm and they were intimately connected to the land for daily bread and sustenance. There were no grocery stores or fast food restaurants. The instruments used to farm the land were plowshares and pruning hooks. These are instruments of *life*. They allowed you to aerate the soil and plant crops, to prune and to harvest. They allowed you to eat. They allowed you to live. In communist Russia the hammer and sickle came to be symbols of the industrial and agricultural working class. Several thousand years prior, the ploughshare and pruning hook were Israel's symbols.

I want to tell you a bit more about ploughshares and pruning hooks, since they aren't so much in style today. Ploughshares are like a big version of a garden hoe...they till, aerate, and ready the soil for planting. Ploughshares prepare the earth for planting and fruitfulness. Pruning hooks are basically pruning shears. They are large instruments used to prune. You prune to remove dead wood, or to shape the plant, to improve or maintain the health of the plant, and to increase the yield or quality of flowers and fruits. Pruning often entails intentional removal of diseased, damaged, or dead tissue from plants. In removing the damaged parts of the plant, all the plant's energy can go to flowers and fruit and new growth, and not waste its energy on the dead parts. So, pruning is ultimately about creating the conditions for flourishing. It is about trimming and shaping, and new growth, new life, and new hope. I want to talk to you about how the season of Advent is a season about plowing and about pruning. Advent is about the tilling of the soil that readies the land, and about the pruning of the plant that enables new growth.

A ploughshare enables fruitful livelihood. It readies and prepares the land for God's holy gifts to take root. The metal blades break up and loosen the hardened earth. Oxygen and new breath infuse the soil. Tilling and plowing the earth is about patient preparation. It is about making space for God. It is about doing everything possible so that God's bounty and abundance might take root in you. In the same way the land is prepared for seeding and planting and growth...this passage from Isaiah extends the hope that our lives also are readied for new life. Jesus said, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly!" God desires to infuse our lives with laughter and friendship and community and faith. God paints a vision of nourishing and nurturing, of thriving and growing, of beauty and peace, of joy and abundance. We are invited to open out frail lives to God's holy life and steep ourselves into the patient soil readied by the ploughshare.

The tilling of the earth allows the soil to breathe. This reminds me of a song we'd sing when I was in college. In typical campus ministry fashion, my campus ministry had a praise band to lead weekly worship. One of my favorite songs involved the music leaders rattling off many of the world's problems in a quick, staccato fashion,

similar to Billy Joel's "We Didn't Start the Fire." Then after the litany of woes we'd all join in the gentle, dulcet chorus that said "Breathe deep. Breathe deep the breath of God." It was a really powerful song, because during the quick, sharp, acceleration of world-wrongs, I could always feel myself getting a bit anxious, but when we would get to the chorus, there was release, and hope, and trust that God could breathe into all of the world's challenges. Breathe deep, breathe deep the breath of God. I still have moments, probably at least weekly, when this chorus comes into my imagination. On days when I'm losing perspective, or it just feels like there is a lot of bleakness in the world, I will often hear that chorus to breathe deep the breath of God. And it always calms my spirit. This is plowing. This is making room for God. This is the ploughshare breaking up the soil and infusing it with the life and breath of the Holy Spirit. If you are feeling suffocated or trampled or just plain worn out, the ploughshare image is a reminder of the reinvigoration of God. That all parts of *you* that are hardened or weary can be broken down and leavened into something ripe for new growth. Breathe deep, breathe deep the breath of God.

And this brings me to the second dimension...pruning. Pruning is about shaping and trimming away those things that may be harming the plant. It is about ensuring the plant remains healthy and fruitful. A plant really can't grow well without pruning. As it pertains to us, pruning is about penitence and examination. It is about turning our gaze inward and taking a hard look at those parts of ourselves that might be impeding our growth. It is about acknowledging the damaged or wounded parts of our lives, and recognizing that sometimes those aspects may just need to be cut off, rather than be allowed to fester and poison the rest of the plant. For about the first 800 years of Christianity, the season of Advent and the season of Lent were very closely connected. Both were seasons in the church year that involved profound preparation. Advent was similar to Lent in that it was kept as a period of fasting and abstinence and deliberate reflection. Pruning is a reminder that Advent isn't just about hope and anticipation and breathing the breath of God, but it is also about repentance and self-reflection and preparing ourselves in a different way. Isaiah's passage about ploughshares and pruning hooks holds together the *plowing* and the *pruning*...the hope, anticipation, and abundant living of the ploughshare can be held in tension with the penitential reflection of the pruning hook.

Advent is about plowing and pruning. Sometimes it can be very difficult to know whether or not a situation needs to be plowed and infused with the new breath of God, or if something needs to be pruned and cut away in order for new life to have a chance to grow. Are there things in your life that needs plowing or pruning? Perhaps there is a relationship that is troubling you. Or you may find yourself drowning under a financial burden. You may have a loved one who struggles with addiction and you simply don't know how to best respond. Sometimes it can be very complicated to know what things require plowing and which ones require pruning. You may not know which course to take. That is okay. We have the assurance that ploughshares and pruning hooks are ultimately tools for life, and growth, and fruitfulness, and joy. God dreams that our life becomes a thriving ground. The tools of life for ancient Israel were ploughshares and pruning hooks. The tools for our life today aren't so different.

I'd like to invite you to step back in time again, back into the world of ancient Israel. Into this world of ploughshares and pruning hooks. It may be that in normal times, life was about plowing and planting and pruning and praying for good weather. But in times of crisis, things took a different shape. Crisis meant that all people were called to possible service, and all agricultural supplies were too. In a time of war, authorities would gather up the ploughshares and pruning hooks to be used in battle. The iron would be melted down and made into swords and spears for fighting. It was a common practice in the ancient world to turn agricultural tools into weapons...this was part of the demands of conscription. Most were helpless in the face of such demands. In the prophet Joel we hear reference to this practice, "Beat your ploughshares into swords, and your pruning-hooks into spears." In Joel 3, instruments of life are being forged into instruments of death. The earth has been ravaged. Israel's heart has been broken. Its livelihood and hope for future sustenance are ripped away in front of its eyes. Ploughshares and pruning hooks are all drawn into the battle against foreign occupation. Life is turned to death.

But 200 years before Joel, Isaiah speaks into this devastation with words of hope and reversal, "God shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any

more.” In an agricultural context, the power of Isaiah’s words become all the more striking. The instruments of battle and death are re-forged into instruments of life and sustenance and freedom. Hear these words as a farmer. Hear these words as someone who has seen the ploughshare and pruning hook beat into weaponry.

Isaiah’s vision of swords being hammered into ploughshares and spears being refashioned into pruning hooks is a passage of profound hope. It is hope that God is making all things new...that God will come dwell among his people...that death will be no more, that mourning and crying and pain will be no more. Weapons of war are transformed back into instruments of our life and growth.

But I wonder how often do we resist this transformation? Because as much as God intends his gifts for our abundance, how often do we instead twist and re-forged those gifts into instruments of harm or destruction? Isaiah gives us hope for one kind of transformation, but we are often inclined, with Joel, the turn gifts back into weapons. This may be on an individual or social or political level. I’m thinking of something like nuclear energy, which has real potential for supplying the world’s energy needs, but can so easily be re-forged into a force for phenomenal harm. I’m thinking of bloggers who are clever and sharp and gifted with words and wit and a dash of sarcasm, who may one day learn that the people they’ve been blogging about in a less than flattering fashion are, in fact, reading their blog. The tongue can build up and edify and encourage, or it can devour and decimate and tear down. Have you used your words as a weapon? Your tongue as a sword?

How often do we twist the gift of God that is in us? If you are feeling your life is just not working right now, is it because the things in your life that were intended to be ploughshares and pruning hooks are instead functioning as swords and spears? Can it be that as much as we like to think we are yearning for life and abundance and flourishing that we have a very real tendency to deform or re-form the gifts we’ve been given? Can it be that we’re too frightened to enjoy the abundant gifts of God, and so we build walls and fashion weapons and go out of our way to protect ourselves?

What does it look like for you to live into the promise of Isaiah? What would it take for you to truly put down your weapons and to re-forged swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks? What needs to be softened and melded and molded in you to transform instruments of harm into instruments of hope? God invites us to bring our sharp edges and prickly personalities, our cutting words and penetrating judgments to him, as the master welder and metalsmith, to reshape and reform our lives into tools of grace and joy and fruitfulness.

Advent is about anticipation and hope and patient preparation and fruit. It is about our deep hope in the fruit of Mary’s womb, come to redeem the world. It is about recognizing that this baby we anticipate with such eagerness was ultimately trimmed and cut down. Christ was plowed and pruned so that we would have a life of abundance and flourishing.

If you are entering this Advent season and wondering if you need to ask God to plow or to prune, and if deep in your heart you really don’t know...the answer is both. The answer is Advent.