



## Plowshares and pruning knives Isaiah 2:2-4

### Preparation

You may want to read today's passage through the end of chapter 2 and compare it with the almost verbatim version of today's oracle in Micah 4.

You may wish to prepare a worship/reflection space with objects or pictures to represent the end of war and the establishing of peace and prosperity. A hammer, for example, might represent beating swords into plowshares. You might mold clay or "playdough" (trademark Play-Doh) into the shapes of various weapons and give people the opportunity before, during, or after the discussion to reshape them into symbols of peace, prosperity, and loving community. You might use Legos or other children's building sets to do something similar. You might also print out one of the pictures in the study below. To focus your meditation on verse 2 -- "the nations will *stream* to [the mountain of Yahweh's house]" -- you might display this picture of children in pirogues (hollowed-out log canoes) on the Congo River.



### Pray the following prayer or one of your own choosing:

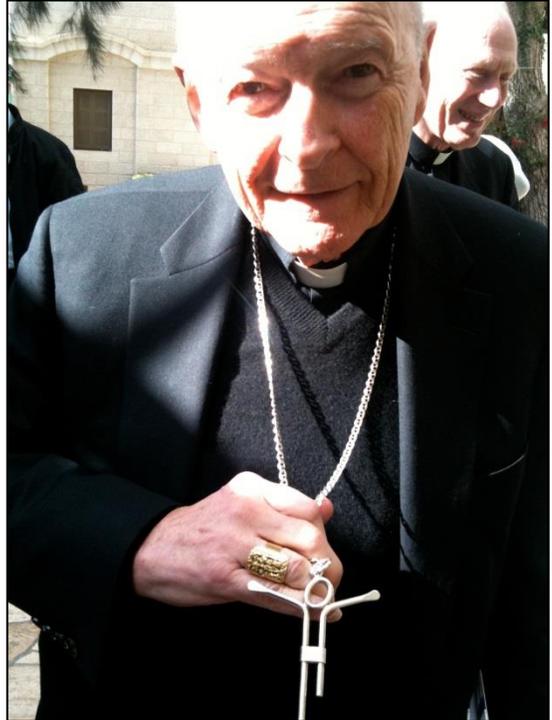
O God,  
by the power of your love  
and the wisdom of your judgments,  
lift the human race from depths of violence and greed.  
Establish your reign in the earth.  
Give us hearts for justice,  
a longing for peace.  
Give us strong arms,  
sturdy legs,  
and powerful lungs  
to swim against the currents  
toward your world of abundance, security and peace.

*In the name of the prince of peace,  
Amen.*

**Read the translation below or one of your own choosing:**

**Isaiah 2:2-4**

*In the days to come,  
the mountain of Yahweh's house will be established as the  
chief of the mountains.  
It will be lifted up above the hills,  
and all the nations will stream to it.  
Many peoples will come and say,  
"Come, let's go up to the mountain of Yahweh,  
to the house of the God of Jacob  
so he can teach us about his ways,  
so we can walk in his paths,  
because from Zion  
Torah will go out,  
the word of Yahweh from Jerusalem.  
He will judge between the nations  
and render judgments for many peoples.  
They will hammer their swords into plowshares,  
and their spears into pruning knives.  
Nation will not lift sword against nation,  
They will no longer learn warfare.  
O house of Jacob,  
come, let's walk in the light of Yahweh!*



Cardinal Theodore McCarrick shows a small necklace figure made from shrapnel and bullet casings by child survivors of landmine blasts.

**Discuss the following questions:**

In the second verse, we're told that the mountain of God's house will be lifted up above the hills and the nations will "stream" to it. Do things "stream" uphill? What do you make of this image?

In light of the oracle as a whole, what do you think the peoples mean when they talk about learning the "ways," the "paths," and the "Torah" or "instruction" of God?

What would it mean in today's world to talk about God "judging between the nations" and "rendering judgments for many peoples"? What would an international order built on God's principles be like? What would some of those godly principles be?

As you think about the situation in Congo today, what would constitute "godly judgments" between the nations for many peoples?

What would it mean today to "hammer swords into plowshares" and "spears into pruning knives"? What would that mean in Congo?

Is this a desirable vision? Why or why not?

What are some things you and your church might do to help make the vision of this oracle a reality?

How might you and your church partner with Christians in Congo to make this vision come true in their country?

### **Streams of justice, plowshares of peace**

This oracle also appears in the book of Micah (4:1-3), suggesting either that one prophet borrowed from the other or that the prophets or whoever edited the final version of their books are citing an oracle from a shared tradition.

In the case of Micah, the oracle functions in its larger literary context as a word of hope for Judeans in Babylonian exile whose faith has been shattered by the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the Davidic monarchy. It's a promise that the exiles will return to Jerusalem and the monarchy will be restored: "I will make the lame a remnant, the ones driven far away, a strong nation, and Yahweh will rule over them in the mountain of Zion, from now till eternity... Your former rule will return, dominion will belong to the daughter of Jerusalem" (vv 7-8). "Now you must go out of the city and camp in the field. You will come to Babylon. There you will be rescued. There Yahweh will rescue you from the grip of your enemies" (v 10). So for Micah, this oracle is a full-blown oracle of salvation, promising the return of the exiles and the restoration of Jerusalem and its monarchy after the disaster of 586 BCE.

In the larger literary context of Isaiah, however, the oracle provides a contrast to the political corruption and violence of the present political order and functions as a prophetic judgment against it. As opposed to Micah, the verses that follow the oracle in Isaiah focus on the corruption of people in power who "have abandoned your people, the house of Jacob," who have made alliances with imperial military powers to the east for the sake of "silver and gold -- there is no end to their treasures!" (Isa 2:6-7). The wealth and military might of foreign nations has led them to "bow down to the work of their own hands, to what their fingers have made" (v 8). Bowing down to wealth and consumer goods has brought the human race low (v 9). Because the rich and mighty imperial powers who exploit the land and violate the poor are so arrogant and proud, Yahweh -- and here, the prophet adds Yahweh's battlefield commander title: Yahweh Ts'vaot, "Yahweh of hosts" (i.e., the "hosts" or "armies" of heavenly beings at God's disposal) -- is preparing a day when all the proud and haughty, all the "towering mountains" and "high hills" of the economic-political system, every high-rise tower and walled community, every large trading ship and high-price yacht (vv 12-16) -- all the arrogant excesses of the human race will be brought down. Yahweh alone will be lifted up in that day (v 17).

So, while for Micah today's Zion oracle functions as a word of hope in the midst of despair, for Isaiah, the very same vision serves as prophetic denunciation of the greed and the economic, political, and environmental devastation brought by foreign imperial powers and the local strongmen who assist them in their plunder of natural resources and human labor. Their worship of consumption, their reckless pursuit of precious metals and minerals, their casual use of violence has debased the humanity of everyone and left the land devastated. For all these reasons, Yahweh will move into "commander-in-chief" mode and take dramatic, forceful action to smash the international systems of violence and exploitation that are wreaking such havoc with the people and the earth.

In contrast to the violence and greed of the foreign imperialists and their local collaborators, Isaiah sees a future for Judah and Jerusalem, following Yahweh's intervention against the powers-that-be, where the rule of law is restored and justice -- internal as well as international -- is established (vv 3-4). International disputes will be handled in a court of law according to the fundamental principles of

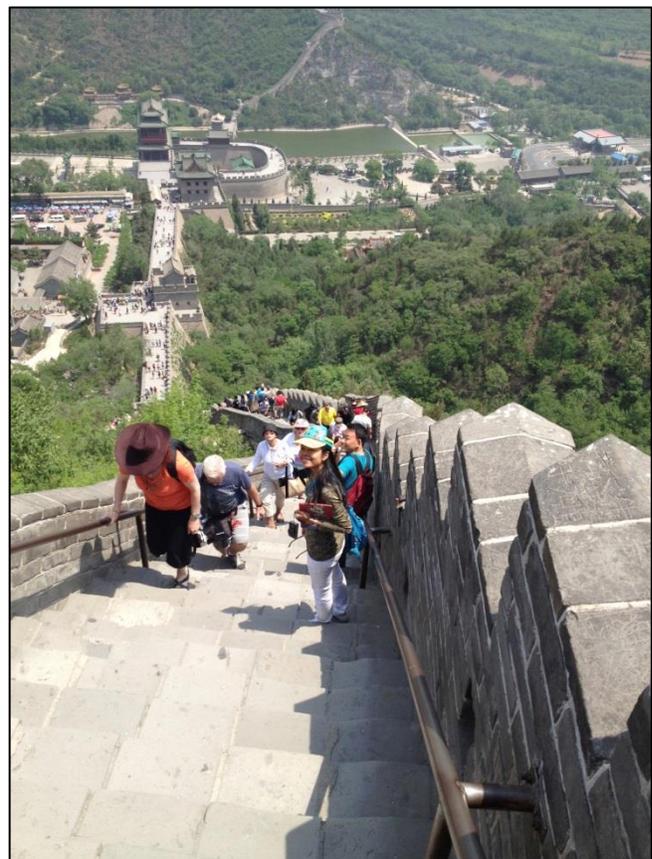
human interaction established by God. War in all its forms, large-scale and small, will become a thing of the past. Weapons will be thrown into the recycle bin, melted down, and reshaped into spare parts for agricultural tools and machinery. Soldiers will never again be sent into the heat of combat. And from now on, we'll spend our money on education for peace, justice, and economic prosperity, not on the think tanks and boot camps of war.

Moving from Isaiah to Micah shows that the very same oracle, with the very same words can have a very different meaning depending on the historical and literary context. In Isaiah, today's oracle functions as a judgment of the corrupt, greedy, and violent status quo. The exact same oracle in the larger context of the book of Micah is an unambiguous word of hope for people who are suffering the spiritual and theological despair of the destruction of Jerusalem and its monarchy. What do these words now mean for us in our radically different, though strikingly similar situation? What do they mean for the people of Congo?

A final intriguing point is raised by the image offered in the opening verse of the oracle (v 2). There the prophet describes the mountain of Yahweh's house as about to become the chief of the mountains, raised up above the other heights of the earth. Then, we're told, "all the nations will stream to it." The word we translate "stream" here is the verbal form of the very common noun for "river" (*nahar*). The mental picture is striking. The law of gravity dictates that rivers flow downhill. But in the days to come, rivers of people will flow uphill toward the mountain of the house of Yahweh which is the highest of the heights. As the image itself suggests, we're not talking about the world as it ordinarily operates. The mountain of the house of Yahweh, presumably the hill in Jerusalem where the palace and temple once stood, is not literally the highest of the heights even in its own geographical location much less in all the earth. And, in any case, rivers do not flow uphill. The image is nonsensical if you limit yourself to the rules that ordinarily govern things. Extraordinary, exceptional power is required to overcome the forces that set the normal course of history.

On February 7, 1812, the area around New Madrid, Missouri, felt the third of a series of strong earthquakes along the New Madrid fault. The quake created Reelfoot Lake and, according to boatmen on the river, caused the Mississippi River to flow backwards for several hours. Reversing the natural course of a river requires an extraordinary input of power.

In the days to come, the prophet says, Yahweh of hosts will provide exactly the kind of extraordinary power that overcomes the downward drift of human political-economic habit



People stream up the Great Wall of China -- not an easy thing to do! Some -- the person who snapped this photo, for example -- have said that a climb like this violates the laws of nature.

and causes the nations to reverse course, to stream uphill toward the house of God, toward the just and equitable rules that God establishes for the flourishing of earth and all its inhabitants. Turning against the tide, swimming against the stream of wealth-worshiping culture is not easy. It is much more comfortable to “go with the flow.” But Isaiah and Micah say that God is calling us to turn around and swim against the current, slowly but surely to turn the course of history to the higher calling and destiny of the human race, to build a world where greed and destructive exploitation of the earth and its human labor are met and overcome with justice and peace, where nations no longer lift up sword against nations and the peoples of the earth study war no more. Such a calling is not easy to answer or quick to fulfill. In fact, it is impossible without the power of God’s justice and love.

### **From swords to plowshares: Christian work and witness in Congo**

We’ve been studying about the various ways international political and economic interests have streamed into eastern Congo in recent decades to exploit the rich deposits of precious metals and vital mineral resources there. Approximately 6 million Congolese have died as a result, and the number of dead and injured continues to grow. The ripple effects on the economic and political life of the nation are devastating. The spiritual and cultural crisis created by incessant war, brutal exploitation, reckless environmental practices, political corruption, and war-induced mass migrations have taken a heavy toll on the strong, resilient, and innovative peoples of Congo. Though the “civil war” -- a fire set, fanned, and continuously fueled by foreign militaries, militias, and economic interests -- has officially ended, the fighting continues, including the deliberate targeting of civilians. Indeed, on July 25, 2013, US Secretary of State John Kerry chaired a meeting of the UN Security Council to urge international support for the Peace, Security, and Cooperation Framework signed in February, 2013, by 11 African nations to end the violence in eastern Congo and build peace and prosperity in the wider region. Yet the violence and destruction continues.

The ministries of the Disciples of Christ community and the ecumenical Church of Christ in Congo, of which Disciples are a founding member, swim against the current of violence, exploitation, and greed that has proved so disastrous for the Congolese people. Providing therapy, support, health care, education, counseling, and micro-financing for the survivors of rape, forced migration, economic devastation, and war, the church is struggling to help Congo turn the tide. Our prayers and financial support through Disciples Mission Fund (Disciples) and Our Churches



Church “majorettes” perform a dance of joy and praise at “Third Christian Church of Mbandaka” (*Mbandaka Trois*). The dark spots on the ceilings are missing tiles blown out by an explosion at an armory nearby during a round of hostilities in the area a few years ago. Basic building supplies are very expensive and difficult to get. But hope defeats fear, joy overcomes despair by the power of God’s people in worshipful prayer and praise.

Wider Mission (UCC) and through our crisis response funds, Week of Compassion (Disciples) and One Great Hour of Sharing (UCC), assist the powerful work of our Congolese sisters and brothers as they seek to reverse the downward course of violence and greed that has brought such incomprehensible death and suffering to millions of God's children.

To learn more about these important healing ministries and other ministries we participate in around the world, visit the [Global Ministries website](#).

Most importantly, lift our sisters and brothers in the Congo in prayer, in conversation, and in advocacy with the governmental and non-governmental agencies that can have such an important impact on daily life in Congo. Pray for our churches as we seek to accompany our brothers and sisters in Congo as they strive to change the course of history. Together, by the grace and power of God, we are reversing the flow and helping the nations, in ways small and large, begin to stream toward the just and peaceful world of God's desire.

**Conclude with the following prayer or one of your own choosing:**

*O God of mercy and  
loving power,  
your dream of peace  
is exalted  
high above  
the plans and priorities of the nations.  
Lift our hearts and minds to you, O God,  
that we may learn your ways  
and walk in the light of your paths.  
Fill us with your desire for justice.  
Give us the stamina and discipline to turn the tide,  
to change the course of exploitation and war.  
Give us the strength to beat swords into plowshares,  
the courage to pound spears into pruning hooks.  
Hear our prayers, O God!  
Hear our prayers!*

*Bless the money we share,  
the prayers we offer,  
the letters we write,  
the leaders we petition.  
Bless the energy and ingenuity  
of the Congolese people,  
and their amazing generosity,  
their extraordinary hospitality,  
that,  
by their power joined with ours,  
motivated and multiplied by yours,  
we may heal the sick,  
bind up the broken-hearted,*

*proclaim liberty to captives  
bring refugees home.  
Help us offer healing comfort and rest  
to the traumatized, the survivors of war,  
the exhausted and hungry who flee its devastations.  
Give us the courage  
and the strength  
to learn your ways  
and walk in them,  
that, by your gracious power,  
we might  
beat swords into plowshares  
and transform the world.  
In Jesus' name,  
Amen.*

**For the complete bible study series please visit  
[www.globalministries.org/congo-initiative/biblestudies.html](http://www.globalministries.org/congo-initiative/biblestudies.html).**