### “Be Not Led Astray” Steve Finlan for The First Church, November 13, 2022

**Isaiah 2:2–5**

2 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. 3 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. 4 He 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.

5 O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!

**Matthew 24:36–39**

36 “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 37For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 38For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, 39and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man.”

Welcome to First Church. I was thinking of all of you this past Thanksgiving and hoping you all had a relaxing and delicious time with your family. I am very thankful for our conversations here. As we go into this Advent season, we have fond memories of previous Christmas seasons. Those days, those memories are ours forever to cherish. We also find ourselves looking with hope to the future, to a world that may come closer to peace, where people act with loving kindness to friend and stranger alike. So, too, did Isaiah look to a bright future when Assyrians, Judahites, and Egyptians would all deal with each other peacefully. We can feel his desire for a better, spirit-led, world.

The return of Jesus, or the Second Coming, is the subject of the Matthew passage, and the Isaiah passage might possibly be related to that future event. We certainly haven’t reached the place where the nations of the world are willing to beat their weapons into farming tools and to learn war no more.

As Isaiah reflected upon the future, he saw that peace would require a reliable method of arbitration between nations. He believed that God himself “shall arbitrate for many peoples” (Isa 2:4). Only a reliable arbitrator could bring about peaceful negotiation between nations as a replacement for any kind of armed conflict. And who could do better than God himself?

Frankly, I don’t think God the Father will personally come down and do that. I think it is something that we humans will need to do. We humans need to grow emotionally and spiritually. World peace awaits a time when more people are inspired by God, as *they* see God, being truly devout. They will have expanded and deepened their understanding and will be able to recognize that the real God is experienced individually, and dissolves all human religious barriers.

There will come a time of increased humility and acceptance among religious leaders, a time when priests, rabbis, and imams are less imperialistic and absolutist about their own religious claims. This will be a time when religious people are willing to respect and recognize spiritual living in people of other religions. At such a time, there will be peace among the world religions, which will contribute to peace among the nations of the world. But it is a stage that we humans have to *earn*. It will not simply be dropped upon us by heaven. When we accomplish this, what an achievement it will be! Every step today towards peace and understanding brings us closer to that happening.

After World War II there was significant groundswell and desire for world peace. The United Nations reflected this hope, and enshrined the words of Isaiah 2 as its motto. But within a few years, the cynicism of competing nations and ideologies rapidly shot down this idealism, and before long there was another large war, this time in Korea.

Much of the conflict in the second half of the 20th century arose out of the hostility of communism toward democratic societies, a conflict that continues today even though Russia has recently rejected communism, and China has blended communism with an aggressive form of capitalism. There will be no world peace as long as violent authoritarianism dominates the world’s most populous countries. Nor can there be world peace if there is aggressive nationalist competition, even if the nations are democratic. There needs to be a more civil and respectful motivation among world leaders, respectful of other nationalities.

I don’t think God will *directly* arbitrate between the nations, but God operating *within* people can persuade them to be more just and reasonable. I *do* hold on to Isaiah’s promise of *eventual* world peace. We don’t know when that day will come, but we *need* it to come. This is the desire of so many hearts, but will we allow it to come about?

We also don’t know when Jesus will return. It will come as a surprise, Jesus says, and nobody knows the day; not even the angels know. Therefore, we should keep our spiritual lights glowing so that we are always ready. We should live as close to the apex of our spiritual readiness as we can. As Paul says, “let us live honorably as in the day . . . put on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 13:13–14). In other words, we are to take on Jesus’ nature. Become spiritually-minded, focused on love, truth, and goodness. Sharing this spiritual light with each other creates a positive spiritual energy that flows outward.

We can take in the words of Paul, who says “Love is patient; love is kind; love . . . rejoices in the truth” (1 Cor 13:4, 6). And Jesus says “just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matt 25:40). If we remember these exhortations, we should be ready for Jesus’ return. Even with our small actions we can prepare the way for peace.

Let us be peacemakers in our own lives. Let us treat others as though they were Jesus’ own children—because they *are*! We can act as though we already live in a time when people’s hearts will begin to turn. We will sing a song that says “wipe away all tears, for the dawn draws near, and the world is about to turn” (“Canticle of the Turning”). This is the noble hope that we hold in our hearts.

Again we can hear the words of Paul regarding hope: “Now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor 13:13). So while we remember the joys of the past we can be instrumental in bringing forth joy, hope, peace, and love for the future. Let the light of God shine forth from you and share God’s love with one another. With God’s love, there is hope for the future.