Isaiah 2:1-5
2:1 The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

2:2 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.

2:3 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.

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.

2:5 O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!

Fasten your seatbelts, beloved, we are already in the midst of the Great Christmas Frenzy. People all over the US are converging upon shopping malls and online retailers, spending billions of dollars to create the Best Christmas Ever, 2022. My heart rate increases just thinking about all there is to do, to buy, to bake, to make, and to celebrate.

Meanwhile, the pandemic and its after-effects continue to affect our country and its people. Over 9 million people in the US have lost a loved one to COVID-19. Many people are still restricting their holiday activities to protect themselves and their loved ones. Almost all of us have had our lives shaken these last two years. The vast majority of Americans - 90 % -
believe we are in the midst of a mental health crisis. For those of us who are struggling with grief and mental well-being, this time of year is particularly painful.

I see so much longing in our midst - both in the intensity of our cultural traditions and practices around Christmas and in our current reality of grief, disruption, and mental health concerns. The hoards of shoppers and decorators and bakers and party planners converge upon a cultural vision of The Perfect Christmas - trying to answer our longing one way. Isaiah’s vision offers a different kind of convergence, a different answer to what we long for.

The Prophet Isaiah is speaking to the children of Israel in a particular time and place. Jerusalem is under siege and King Ahaz is backed into a corner. All the choices facing him are bad ones. So he looks to Isaiah for advice and assurance. Isaiah, true to prophetic tradition, first names the behavior that has gotten them into this situation: prioritizing the desires of the powerful and neglecting the vulnerable and the oppressed and hollow worship that ignores God’s desire for the flourishing of all people. Isaiah reminds Ahaz of what God requires: “Give up your evil ways. Learn to do good. Seek justice. Help the oppressed. Defend the cause of orphans. Fight for the rights of widows.” Do you hear him harmonizing with Micah 6:8 here - “what does the LORD require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your god?” Micah and Isaiah were contemporaries. They also share the text you just heard. Micah 4:1-5 are almost exactly the same as Isaiah 2:1-5. Both prophets are speaking of the convergence of God’s longing with the longing of their
people: for true peace, for the weapons of violence to be repurposed into tools for flourishing in community.

That longing strikes a chord with me as well. Does it for you? Who among us does not long for peace and flourishing? When I look at my own striving and rushing towards the cultural Christmas expectations, I see my own attempts to somehow recapture those moments when joy and peace converged into what might only be described as a tiny glimpse of God’s Kingdom among us:

Snow falling on Christmas morning, my parent’s tree lit, gifts unwrapped, bellies full, the glow of joy, togetherness, hopes fulfilled all around us.

The Thanksgiving when I invited anyone from seminary who didn’t have family to go to - several international students showed up as well as folks from all over town.

Singing Silent Night by candlelight in a church full of people.

The laughter and joy of children.

At Christmastime, it feels like we are trying to recreate some half remembered past and a moment when we glimpsed what was possible, when we felt overwhelmed by the feelings of joy and peace. So we strive to assemble those moments again - only even better - MORE joy, MORE peace, MORE Christmas.
There is nothing inherently wrong with our Christmas longings - nothing wrong with seeking joy. Nothing wrong with nostalgia. But that isn’t the whole picture we are called to this Advent Season. We are called to a greater future than gifts around the Christmas tree.

And though we may long for moments past, our call is not to look backward but to look forward. God’s work is continuously progressive not regressive. We have never known a time like Isaiah describes. There is no Fullness of the Kin-dom of God to go back to. Even during the time of Jesus, he preached that the Kingdom of God was among us AND on its way. During his earthly life and after his resurrection, he pointed toward a moment in the future when all of God’s purposes would be realized.

The promise that Isaiah lays out for us is preposterous, to be sure. Completely impossible. World peace, equity and flourishing for all. We ask as Mary did in Luke’s Gospel: how can this be? And yet. Here we are. Gathered on this first Sunday in Advent- at the end of Thanksgiving weekend even. Because we believe, somewhere within us that maybe, just maybe, God really is at work, doing the impossible in this world.

Pastor, preacher, and writer, Paul Simpson Duke, imagines it this way:

A new community is being gathered to the
Holy, a multicultural, multiracial, multilingual convergence.

And this convergence of all the nations upon God’s Holy Mountain to align themselves with God’s ways and God’s light will result in an end to all violence. To swords being beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. The people decide, collectively, that they will no longer be students of war.

This image has inspired countless works of art. I have read that, at St. Louis University’s Jesuit Chapel, the light fixtures are repurposed 20th century canon shells. Emptied of their death dealing contents, they now provide light for people to pray by. Light that expresses the depth of human longing and hope: the end of violence, the end of pandemics, the end of hunger and oppression and marginalization. The literal expression of the Light of God.

Back in 8th Century BCE Jerusalem, King Ahaz’s situation will not end well. Here, in 21st Century America, we are not so certain about our own situation either. But Isaiah’s vision still sparks hope. Even though millennia of striving and longing have yet to bring it to fruition, there is still something within us that knows - or at least hopes - that it is true.

I had a seminary professor that asked “What if the second coming of Jesus occurs when the church finally takes its role as the Body of Christ
seriously?” I think that question is a good one. But I think I misunderstood it at the time. I wanted to turn the church’s role as Christ’s Body into another project of striving. Like, if we just try hard enough to be Jesus in the world, then God’s will will be realized. But, over the years I have come to understand that Human power can only get us so far. It’s less about striving to be and do and more about what Mary did - being open enough to be filled with God.

The Reign of God is a convergence of Divine and human energy and action towards God’s purpose. We can’t do it alone. And, God will not do it alone. So, even as Isaiah casts his vision of the convergence of all our hopes and longings, he also extends an invitation:

Come, let us walk in the light of God! We cannot decide for “all people” but we can decide for ourselves to commit ourselves to the journey of walking in God’s Light. We can allow that light to influence every aspect of our lives. We can allow that light to begin the work of healing within our tattered and scattered hearts. We can allow that light to pull us into a greater sense of peace and a deeper understanding of all of the ways we are interconnected with one another. We can ask that light to guide us into the future that God intends and hopes for us. We can look for that light in the eyes of all the people we meet during this season of hustle and bustle and beyond. We can decide, in the warmth of that light, what to preserve and what to let go of this season. We can bask in that light when we recognize glimpses of that great convergence to come when nation will not rise against nation and weapons become farming tools. Come, my dear ones, let us walk in the light of God!