

vision turns to reality, the harmony of the universe that Shatner was seeking will be visible for all to see.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



First Presbyterian Church
of Royal Oak

November 27, 2022
First Sunday of Advent
“The Long View of Advent”
Rev. Emma Nickel
Isaiah 2:1-5

Last fall, William Shatner went on a short space flight on Jeff Bezo’s Blue Origin rocket. For those too young to remember or simply not interested in the Star Trek universe, Shatner played Captain Kirk on the very first iteration of the Star Trek TV show in the 1960s. So it seemed fitting that he would get this shot to go into space, if only briefly, in real life. (That, and his gazillions of dollars that allowed him to buy a ticket.) A year later, Shatner has published a memoir about his life, which includes his experience in space. When he got his birds’ eye view of the world, it wasn’t wonder or awe or the glory of the Earth that he felt looking out the window. It was profound grief. Shatner wrote that space was “cold, dark, black emptiness.”¹ Seeing that in comparison to the warmth and life of the earth filled him with an “overwhelming sadness.”

Shatner didn’t expect this reaction. He thought he would experience the “harmony of the universe” in space. It’s possible the actor didn’t do enough research before buying his ticket. Because the grief Shatner felt is actually a well-documented phenomena among astronauts who’ve been to space. Called “the overview effect,” it’s a powerful experience of noticing how fragile the earth appears against the harshness of space. And that is followed by deep concern and worry for this, our home. Most who experience the overview effect develop renewed vigor to sustain the earth and its creatures long into the future. As researchers describe it, the experience sounds incredibly emotional; overwhelming even.

You and I are not going to space anytime soon. But I don’t think we have to get a view from space to feel something like that overwhelming sense of grief for the fragility of our world. Talk to a neighbor or friend and you’ll hear it. Turn on the news and you see it. Even as we celebrate holidays and the wonderful parts of life, we know the world is hurting - the land, waters, and creation - as well as humanity as a whole. Sometimes, it causes us to grieve deeply, even to avoid the news completely to preserve our own mental health.

The prophet Isaiah was speaking to a nation facing an uncertain future. His listeners might have been filled with grief for the world, too. The peace that Israel and Judah had experienced centuries before was long gone and the Assyrian empire was bearing down on them. God’s people didn’t

¹William Shatner, “William Shatner: My Trip to Space Filled Me With ‘Overwhelming Sadness’ (EXCLUSIVE),” *Variety*, October 2, 2022, <https://variety.com/2022/tv/news/william-shatner-space-boldly-go-excerpt-1235395113/>

² Tyler Mayfield, *Unto Us a Child Is Born: Isaiah, Advent, and Our Jewish Neighbors* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 129..

³ Katie Eastman, “Colorado father and son transform guns into garden tools,” Nov 22, 2021, 9News, <https://www.9news.com/article/features/father-and-son-transform-guns-into-garden-tools/73-ecd4bca7-af98-4a5f-a364-7a6b00966433>

⁴ <https://rawtools.org/swords-to-plowshares/>

know what kind of existence lay ahead. They might have been fearing that the world would be worse for their kids and grandkids than it had been for them. We hear that pretty frequently in our own time. When we hear that predication, we think about the steamroller of climate change that is bearing down on us, and especially people far more vulnerable than us. About war that never goes away, no matter how useless and destructive it is. About the effects of technology that we can't seem to live without, but that one day, we may not be able to live with. We live with a looming sense of worry for the world as it is and as it may be becoming.

In his time, Isaiah answered the people's grief with a word of hope from God. His prophecy was not a look into a crystal ball, but a confident message from God that the world as they saw it was not the only story. The prophet promised that God was up to something else, too. Isaiah painted the picture of God's house high on the mountain, filled with majesty. It's a place people want to come; people from every race and nation stream there to encounter God's teachings and to live in the way God invites. They are not forced to come, they're drawn there by the goodness of God. And in this vision, God intervenes among the nations to settle disputes and to work out right-relations among them. Because of what the people have learned, and because of what God is doing, they no longer need tools of war and destruction. So, with effort and persistence, they change those weapons into helpful tools.

Last weekend there was, again, a shooting at an LGBTQ club, this time in Colorado. Along with victims at the University of Virginia and at the Walmart in Chesapeake, Virginia, we feel both grief and numbness, again, for victims of gun violence. There is a poignant poem making its way around the internet that imagines Jesus himself dancing at that club in Colorado, reminding the patrons of his presence and love. That is one piece of the hope we have as Christians - that Christ is present already in the midst of unrelenting sorrow and grief. But another piece of our faith is our future hope. Our hope that the world will one day be transformed so that no party-goer or grocery-shopper or school-child turns around to see a gunman in their midst. No peaceful nation faces the threat of nuclear destruction by a world leader bent on absolute power. No village goes hungry because the rains have all dried up.

Isaiah's vision speaks this kind of future hope into our grief for a fragile, at-risk world. His vision does not say we should just wait around for God's final judgment, in order for justice to come. He says that time of peace is part of the future God is unfolding. But that it can be established among us in the current times, with divine assistance. We certainly need God's help and intervention to get there. But if we all act with the same kind of urgency that the astronauts return to earth feeling, then perhaps we can see glimpses of this vision begin to take shape. The prophet promises that God is leading us

into a future different than we might expect, and that together, we can be part of that movement toward a new, life-giving reality.

Isaiah paints that beautiful image of swords of violence made into plows for the earth. And spears being turned into garden tools to prune vines and shrubs. Tyler Mayfield is an Old Testament scholar at Louisville Theological Seminary. He writes that the idea of swords into plows isn't a pie in the sky idea; rather, it critiques the ineffectiveness and destruction of our weapons. And I would say that doesn't just mean weapons made of metal. Like our prayer of confession said today, we use lots of other weapons that need to be transformed: like quick judgments and gossipy tongues, cynical actions and mistrust of others. Mayfield says that God intends to turn these "instruments of death...[into] tools for nurturing life."² The Hebrew word for *beating* the swords means *to pulverize or crush them to pieces*. It shows just how much it takes to make that transformation. But also how complete a transformation it will be. When those new tools take shape, life will be nurtured and cared for; creativity and goodness will blossom.

After Sandy Hook, Mike and Fred Martin felt the same grief and dread that almost all Americans did. When they took the long view out into the future, they were worried about what they saw. To try to nurture life and hope, they learned the blacksmithing trade, with all its intense heat and precise know-how. Using that practice in their garage, they are living out Isaiah's vision. They have now crushed the metal of more than 1000 guns to transform them into garden tools.³ Inspired by their Mennonite faith, they believe in peaceful conflict resolution and they know that guns do not serve a purpose in resolving conflicts between citizens. Much of their work has resulted from gun buyback programs in partnership with local authorities near their home in Colorado. But they also welcome individuals to donate a gun they no longer want or need and have it turned into a rake, or hoe, or shovel, free of charge. Their organization, RAWtools has given them a way to creatively use the grief they feel toward gun violence to live into hope.⁴ It's clear that the Martins have learned God's instruction, and are trying to walk in the light of the Living God.

The Reformer Martin Luther is quoted as saying "When the world is falling apart, plant a tree." It turns out the quote is apocryphal. But the intention about how to practice hope is the same. When our overview of the world, even at sea level, is that it is hurting and we feel overwhelmed with grief, we can draw closer to Isaiah's vision. We can go to the mountain of the Lord to keep learning God's ways. We can plant a tree - a literal one, perhaps, to feel the tangible hope it provides. We can turn our own weapons of destruction - like mistrust and judgment - into tools that nurture life - like compassion and vulnerability. Isaiah's vision didn't imagine a savior. But we believe a world that looks like Isaiah's vision will be one in which the Christ has come and we are drawn close to him. In which our Redeemer is indeed present in the midst of things, inviting us to walk in the light. And as that