

[Fight vs Flight] How do you respond to conflict? Whenever I do premarital counseling, we have a whole session about fighting. I ask each person to talk about their families, how their parents fought, how they fought with their parents and siblings. It's always illuminating, and most couples have a fighter and a flighter.

That's certainly true for Amanda and me. Her family are conflict avoiders. If someone is mad at you, you might hear about it third hand. They're flighters. My family is the complete opposite. We fight about the smallest conflicts immediately and loudly. We're fighters.

I've counseled a lot of people - engaged and not - over the years, and pretty much everyone defaults into one of these two camps. We either love to fight or conflict makes us sweaty and nervous and we run away as fast as we can. We all tend toward fighting or flighting.

[Fight vs Flight → Garden] But as we all know, neither fight nor flight creates peace. We think peace is the absence of conflict, that it's a passive state that conflict disrupts. But we'll see today that conflict is not bad. And conflict is not anti-peace. Peace is what happens when we learn how to do conflict well. Rather than fighting or flighting, with care and attention, conflict can be cultivated, and good can grow. Peace can flourish.

If we want to be a people of peace, we must trade our weapons of conflict for instruments of cultivation. Peace is like a garden - it doesn't happen by accident. It takes work and intention. If we are willing to work, we can cultivate conflict into community.

This tension is at the heart of our Advent series, PURE IMAGINATION. Advent is the season of the Church year where we anticipate the birth of Jesus. We are helped to prepare ourselves to welcome Jesus by listening to the prophets who spoke to God's people over the hundreds of years they anticipated the birth of the Messiah. During this series, we're going to listen to the Prophet Isaiah as he paints pictures of what the world will look like when the Messiah comes.

[Timeline? Isaiah, Jesus' birth, Us, Second Coming?] Because we know the Messiah has come, Advent is a time of looking both backward and forward. As Israel anticipated Jesus' first coming, now we anticipate his second coming. The Scriptures talk a lot about what the world will look like when God returns - swords will be beaten into plowshears. Wolves and lambs will lie down together. Deserts transformed into lush paradises.

It's easy to hear these visions and shrug them off as wishful thinking, pure imagination. They're unrealistic. They'll never happen.

But as the people of God, we live between Jesus' first coming and his second. We recognize that what the prophet saw hasn't all happened yet. His visions are visions of what God *will do*. Isaiah enables us to see the Kingdom of God coming, and his visions invite us to participate in what will be right where we are.

Isaiah challenges us to have a Pure Imagination, a holy vision of what's coming, so that we can act out the future in the here and now. So as we prepare for Christmas, today, we see that preparation looks like learning to cultivate conflict. (Which, for a lot of us, isn't a bad place to start preparing for Christmas!)

[Map: Israel, Judah and Assyria] So let's journey back to Isaiah's world. Isaiah lived in the 8th century BC. At that time, God's people were divided into two kingdoms: Israel in the North and Judah in the South. Isaiah lived in Judah. During his lifetime, both kingdoms were under threat from the fearsome Assyrian Empire. In fact, during Isaiah's lifetime, Assyria conquered Israel, destroying the nation. You can imagine how nervous this made the people of Judah. But in all their worry, they didn't turn to God for help.

Again and again, the people of Judah looked to other nations, other gods, to their own wealth and ability to protect themselves. This would prove to be disastrous for them.

[Scripture Slide] Turn with me to Isaiah 2. As you're turning there, the first chapter of the book is an oracle of judgement against Judah. We see that, though the people are giving lip service to God, they don't actually live as God's people. They do sacrifices and sing hymns and offer prayers, but when they leave the Temple, they oppress the poor, ignore the orphan and widow. Their politicians are corrupt and the people are looking to gods other than Yahweh for protection and provision.

Because Judah refuses to be faithful to God, Isaiah foresees disaster coming on them. But their faithlessness is not the last word. Isaiah sees a better world coming, one in which God transforms all the conflict we experience into something beautiful. Let's read together:

This is a vision that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem:

In the last days, the mountain of the Lord's house will be the highest of all— the most important place on earth. It will be raised above the other hills, and people from all over the world will stream there to worship. People from many nations will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of Jacob's God. There he will teach us his ways, and we will walk in his paths."

For the Lord's teaching will go out from Zion; his word will go out from Jerusalem. The Lord will mediate between nations and will settle international disputes. They will hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will no longer fight against nation, nor train for war anymore.

Come, descendants of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the Lord! -- Isaiah 2:1-5

Isaiah sees a day when all the nations of the world come to God's Temple. Every nation will learn God's way, walk God's path. Humanity will all live together as God created us to live. This is peace!

But notice, that doesn't mean there's no conflict. Rather, God will mediate between nations and settle disputes. Stop on that for a moment: Even in the End, when Jesus returns and all people are living together in harmony, we'll still have conflict.

Conflict and peace are not mutually exclusive. In fact, true human flourishing includes conflict. Why? Because conflict is not inherently bad. Conflict is simply what happens when two people (or groups) want different things. We like to think in our conflicts that I'm right and they're wrong. But more often, we're both right - and both wrong.

Conflict is an opportunity to grow, to learn from each other. Conflict is *essential* to our flourishing because conflict that's resolved well helps us become stronger, wiser, kinder people. And when we resolve conflict as God teaches us to, the bonds of community and neighborliness grow stronger.

How does God resolve conflict? Isaiah tells us: we beat our swords into plowshares. Isaiah's metaphor is powerful: Swords are instruments of war. We use swords to protect ourselves from enemies. We also use swords to force our will on others. - Flight and flight.

But Isaiah challenges us to imagine a day where we won't need weapons of war. We'll still have conflict, but we won't have to protect ourselves and we won't want to impose our will on others.

Instead, all those weapons of war will be turned to garden tools. We'll use them to cultivate relationships with each other, to build bridges. We won't have armies, we won't train for war. We'll live in peace.

About half of us are *really* excited about this vision. We're so tired of fighting, of terror, of war and child soldiers and civil unrest. But the other half are rolling our eyes. We're snickering and thinking, "That really *is* pure imagination." It's difficult to imagine a day that no nation would need an army. It's difficult to imagine not needing weapons to protect ourselves or to fight back.

And yet, the prophet's call rings out to us:

Come, descendants of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the Lord!

Given this vision of the future, we are called to walk in God's light *now*. We are called to be the first people to live in God's way, to beat our swords into plowshares. We are to be to the world a sneak preview of that coming day.

And in fact, because Jesus has come into the world, we know we're more than a sneak preview. When Jesus was crucified and raised from the dead, God began to bring this new world into existence. We live now between two worlds - the world of death, of war and violence that is passing away, and the world of life, of peace and flourishing for all peoples. Which means when we are in Christ, we are part of this new world. That new world begins *now* for us, even as we wait for it to arrive fully.

So we don't wait until *then* to walk in God's way. We begin to live as God's people *now*. We imagine this impossible world of peace and flourishing, and when people laugh, we smile and shrug and say, "If God can raise Jesus from the dead, then there is nothing God cannot do."

And we live into that new world in faith that God is with us even now.

We are much like Israel. Churches are often worse than other places at conflict (because we think being Nice is a fruit of the Spirit). Too often, the Church is silent in the face of injustice. Issues are too complex, or too frightening, so we just ignore it. We come to Church, sing our songs, say our prayers and go back to keeping our heads down. If we do speak up, it's to fight. We wield religion like a club to beat down those who disagree with us, shaming and judging those who disagree with us.

Like Israel, when we get scared, we don't turn to God. When faced with enemies to our way of life, we put our trust in our nation, our bank accounts, our weapons. We want to build walls or war machines.

But Isaiah calls us instead to Come and walk in the light of the Lord.

We will never be a people who cultivates peace at the cultural level until we begin to cultivate peace at the individual level.

So think with me for a moment: What kinds of conflicts do you find yourself involved in from day to day? From week to week? How do you respond to conflict? Do you tend to avoid or engage?

We have weapons of conflict. Our sharp words. Our cold shoulders. Our punishments. Our aggression and our passive-aggression.

As God's people, we can do the hard work now of beating those weapons into tools for cultivation. This takes humility. As an Advent people, we recognize that we are still on this side of the Second Coming. Isaiah's vision hasn't come to pass yet. We can't assume we have perfect knowledge - quite the opposite. We recognize our perspective is flawed and imperfect. Which means when we engage in conflict, we're on the wrong side, at least some of the time. And since we don't know when that is (or we'd switch to the right side!), we should approach every conflict with *humility*.

[Bring back Fight or Flight] Humility changes the goal of our conflict. Rather than avoiding or fighting, humility lets us cultivate.

Flighters: Don't avoid the issue. If we are to be a cultivating people, our goal is the flourishing of *both* sides, and that can't happen unless we engage conflict. We need you. So don't avoid. Engage.

That doesn't mean we fight, though. Fighters: our goal is to win. But if we are to be a cultivating people, our goal must be to understand and compromise. This requires humility. I have to be able to say, "My perspective isn't perfect. I have something to learn from the other person."

[Bring Back Fight vs Flight → Garden] When you approach a conflict, change your goal. Instead of expecting to win, expect to meet in the middle (even if you don't know where that middle is).

Instead of seeing your opponent as an enemy to be avoided or defeated, see them as a friend to understand (this should be second nature in marriages and friendships, but somehow even there we treat them as enemies!)

Rather than fight or flight, we must pursue kind, humble and loving relationships. In other words, we have to cultivate community.

Often in conflict, the issue that sparks the conflict isn't the actual conflict. An argument about taking out the trash is really about feeling under-appreciated or unsupported. A fight over the office fridge covers deeper workplace tensions.

[Spears to Shovels] Conflict is usually associated with anger. But anger is a secondary emotion - it always covers hurt or insecurity. So if you feel yourself getting mad, STOP. Instead of using your weapons to dig at the other person, turn them on yourself. Do you feel scared? Insecure? Inadequate or stupid? Confused? Don't let your anger get the best of you. Figure out how to approach this conflict calm, respectful and without being defensive. Instead of fighting with each other, dig down to the root of the conflict. Figure out what the hurt or insecurity is and have some real conversation about it.

Friends, this sounds so mundane. We started out with a vision of world peace, but now we're talking about trash and offices fridges. But this is where Isaiah's vision meets our reality. World peace will *always* be a pipe dream unless we become a people of peace.

If we cannot learn to embrace people who are different from us, we will never be the people of God. If we cannot learn to love people for who they are, not who we wish they were, how can we say we love the God who welcomes us as we are? If we cannot learn to put down our weapons of war, to shape them into tools of cultivation, how can we claim to be a people of peace?

The prophet's vision begins here and now, with you and me. In a few moments, I'm going to ask you to consider a conflict you have in your life right now - one you've been avoiding or one you've been fighting. I'll ask you to prayerfully consider how you can cultivate community out of that conflict.

[Communion Slide] But first, we approach the Communion Table. This is the table where God made peace with us. God did not flee from us, remain in Heaven where it's safe. He instead gave us his body, broken for our sin. God did not wage war on us. Rather he gave us his blood, poured out to make peace with us.

1. When in the last week did you cultivate conflict into community?
2. When in the last week did you avoid or fight?
3. When in the next week will you be tempted to fight or to avoid a conflict?
4. How can you cultivate that conflict into community?