

TESTIMONY

The Word Made Fresh

DANIEL BERRIGAN

Foreword by John Dear

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*They Shall Beat Their Swords
into Plowshares*

*Everything enhances, everything
gives glory—everything!*

*between bark and bite
Judge Salus's undermined soul
betrays him, mutters
very alleluias.*

*The iron cells—
row upon row of rose trellised
mansions, bridal chambers!*

*Curses, vans, keys, guards—behold
the imperial lions of our vast acres!*

*And when hammers come down
and our years are tossed to four winds—
why, flowers blind the eye, the saints
pelt us with flowers!*

*See, the Lord's hands heap
eon upon eon,
like fruit bowls at a feast.*

Courage Is a Verb

In Other Words, Do It!

And God will judge between the nations, and will render decisions for many peoples. And they will hammer their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not lift sword against nation. Never again will they learn war.

—Isaiah 2:4



I SUPPOSE in the estimate of everyone there are one or two commanding texts, whether in the Hebrew Bible, the Koran, the Gita, or the Christian Testament, that beckon us from “the paralysis of analysis,” as Dr. Martin Luther King would say. Beckon us, that is, to doing it.

At that point, perhaps we touch on the point of faith itself, as Kierkegaard wrote. Surely he was the great and dour decrier of a Christianity that remained “an inert truth,” as Whitehead would put it; or a Christianity that remained merely “notional,” as Newman would put it. In any case, a religion dead and buried in the mind. A religion that put to naught an essentially commanding word and summons.

Do it! To me, this text of Isaiah has been pure summons. A vigorous text, designed to set the human in motion. Stand there indeed, but do something!



The congruence between the times in which the oracle was first issued and our times is striking, unsettling, close. Isaiah spoke in the eighth

Daniel and Philip Berrigan and the Plowshares Eight hammered on unarmed Mark 12A nuclear nose cones at the General Electric plant in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania, in the first “Plowshares” disarmament action on September 9, 1980. They originally faced three to ten years in prison for their civil disobedience, but after years on appeal, the Pennsylvania Court of Common Pleas in Norristown sentenced them on April 10, 1990, to time served. Since then there have been over eighty Plowshares actions around the world. For a chronology see www.plowsharesactions.org.

century B.C.E., a time of imperial darkness, of wars and rumors of wars, of duplicity in high places. Isaiah entered deliberately this scene of desolating power.

His method was, to say the least, unsettling to conventional religion and politics. A religious figure, and most political! Isaiah refuses to separate public responsibility from the voice of God within.

It was all quite simple. He had seen God, therefore.

It was a terrifying equation—and remains such. He had seen God, therefore he had a message for the king and the people. The premise and conclusion were forged with a fiery, dangerous simplicity, the simplicity of a saint or a madman.



Isaiah seemed to have enjoyed a vogue, for awhile. He was heard in places of power, he had audience at the throne, for awhile. Then the war with Assyria broke; it proceeded bloodily, and was hardly resolved. Prelude to more violence, never an end of it. A war like every other war.

And the fortunes of Isaiah were altered. War was resumed. A “Second Isaiah” enters. The message darkened. Now the prophet spoke only of doom and defeat, words perennially unwelcome to imperial ears. This other prophet said, in effect, the first war was only a first act. You shall now be invaded, Samaria will fall.

So it transpired. And worse. Eventually, a siege was laid to Jerusalem by Sennacherib of Assyria.



In those terrible years, this voice was, in one way or another, a presence to be reckoned with. The imperial adventurers, whether foreign or domestic, felt the sting of his prophecy. He played a variety of roles. Sometimes he reminds us of a court fool, sometimes of a dog at the wheels of a rampaging chariot, sometimes he is an honored oracular presence. He dwells at length on bad outcomes to dubious enterprises. And oftener than may be thought healthy, he derides the foolish inflations of ruling ego.



And then, something else.

An oracle that seems to issue from a burning bush or a fiery epiphany. Isaiah announces—the impossible. The necessary impossible, the absolutely crucial impossible; the impossible that must come to pass.

That which shall come to pass, precisely because it is impossible.

“They shall beat their swords into plowshares.” It is as though he were holding in suspension two fiercely incompatible elements. One is icy, one fiery. A terrifying experiment! The necessary must somehow be joined to the impossible. Something new, something beyond all effort and imagining must come to be.

Swords into plowshares. The oracle is absolutely crucial to the prospering of cultures, of nations, to the survival of individuals, to honor, to religious faith, to a civilized sense of humanity. To the fate of the earth.

But the oracle is also impossible of fulfillment. (Who then, who now, believes it could come to pass? After Vietnam, after Grenada, after Panama, after Nicaragua, after El Salvador, after Iraq? Who believes?)

Therefore, the conclusion of Isaiah. Because the task is crucial, necessary, and because it is radically impossible—therefore it must be done. The oracle will come true. God has sworn it.

“They shall beat swords into plowshares.” The words surpass the human, even while they engage the human. Even while they commit, invite, command, exact vows, demand conversion of heart.



It is in the unlikely coincidence of these two, the human that surpasses the cultural understanding and thereby betrayal of the Bible, that the truth of God is addressed.

Indeed, the oracle surpasses the cultural grant to the human. Is anyone in need of instruction on our helplessness, our lassitude, our sleep of death, our psychic numbness, our inertia of soul, before a dreadful nuclear predicament? Our successive and savage incursions from Vietnam to Iraq? Is anyone in need of instruction, as our planet, insulted and raped, wounded in its elements of fire, water, air, land, cries out for redress, sinks in exhaustion, can no longer replenish, heal, sustain, our heedless tribe?

And yet, and yet. The oracle, like a resurrecting command, beckons forth this very helplessness, this acceptance of dumb fate, this rehearsal of death. You are not helpless, you are not objects of fate, you are not dead. Your despair is to your shame.

“Your sins are forgiven. Arise and walk.”



Further, understand that it is not God who through some magic or other will beat swords into plowshares: it is yourselves. It is you—whom the

times have beaten, literally—your spirit, enterprise, imagination, your very humanity—into the form of death, into the form of a sword. The blade lies at your own throat. You taste the death before death which we name despair.

Disarm. Take care of the widow, the orphan, and the poor.

It must be done, and it cannot be done. And if it is to be done, it must be done because God wills it, and it must be done by us.



The task is literally impossible, to our resources, to our will. Sixty years of cold war, successive American wars, nuclear threats—these testify, pitifully, cynically, to the impossibility.

Disarmament? Nuclear? Conventional? Disarmed hearts? The summons lies beyond all political wit and witlessness. It is impossible to Russians, Americans, French, British, Chinese, Germans, Israelis, Indians, Pakistanis. Impossible to Harry Truman and George Bush. Impossible to uncommitted nations and passionately communist and capitalist nations. The “kingdoms of darkness” and the purported “kingdoms of light” are equally plunged in darkness.

And perhaps most striking of all, beating swords into plowshares is impossible to conventional Christianity. During these awful years, in most of the nuclear nations we have hardly seen a suffering or witnessing church. No Isaiah arises in the churches. No oracles cast light on the benighted nations. Indeed, the churches show little or no interest in echoing the oracle of First Isaiah. Let it be said plainly: The churches, by and large, have aided and abetted, have co-conspired, have laid a blessing on the forging of swords. A blessing that is a curse.



And yet the oracle sounds in our ears with absolute assurance. “They shall beat swords into plowshares, spears into pruning hooks.” They shall do this; which is to say, ourselves, in this generation, in our lifetime, during our adulthood, in no other. Shall our children be safe, our world salvaged? It is literally, and brutally, now or never.



I fear to fall into another sort of fatalism here. As though in saying “now or never,” I were saying something like this:

“The famous clock of the nuclear scientists has been ticking away, a time bomb. We stand to lose everything, unless we muster our resources

and lay our effort to a nuclear accommodation, an Icelandic freeze, so to speak. All are agreed there are too many nukes. Very well, let us reason together. Let us find an acceptable number of nukes to live with. Let us seek a marriage of convenience in Armageddon.”

I do not mean this. It is too easy in principle. It is also frivolous in political understanding and doomed in practice. The oracle of Isaiah stands against all such absurd “peacekeeping,” a nuclear winter in the soul, desolate terror as a way of life.



I do mean this. Isaiah stands against this; so does God. The oracle proceeds neither from expediency nor psychological necessity nor imperial arrogance, however veiled; not from armageddonists nor from nuclear nightmares or daymares; not from the spirit of blackmail, rancor, ideologies bloody or bloodless. It proceeds from a different source than these polluted ones. It proceeds, Isaiah says, from the fidelity of God joined together with human courage.



The word implies a promise. Disarmament shall happen; wars shall cease; the outcome is irresistible. No human will, no malevolence, no nation, not the most powerful imperium, can prevent it. The tone of Isaiah is absolute, assured—for the promise is uttered by God, and God is faithful.



I have an image, awakened by the text. First of all, a hand. Or better, many hands. The hands of women and men and children. Hands of farmers and workers, writers and artists, ministers and students, old and young, hands of pacifists and former warriors. Indeed, the text implies that all hands are symbolized by just two, the one unlikely, the other consistent. First, the converted warrior, the veteran who casts his medals away; and then the farmer, cultivator, nurturer, cherisher, the “complete ecologist,” the lover of children and of all the living.

In any case, such hands, armed only with hammers, come down with force against a bared weapon. They bend it around, blunt its cruel edge, neutralize its threat. And more, for they are not mere destroyers. They transform instruments of death and maiming and blood, transform them into something new, useful, prohuman.

In the act, those who forcefully lend the sword its new shape are themselves transformed.



As a little child, each spring, I stumbled along after the plow as my father turned the earth up, one furrow upon another. A mild, breathing sense of life arose in the suave air, after the killing North Country winter. The plow hummed along. I imagined that the giants of the earth were turning over in sleep, just before awakening. Or I thought of the furrows as great coils of woven rope, weaving, binding all things in one. The blades of a plow wove the tegument of the world together. It was all one—seasons and furrows, families and beasts, plantings and harvest.

The child, it must be admitted, was not notably useful to the work. He went along, free and feckless, a contemplative of the new season, wandering, humming to himself, falling behind, catching up. Sometimes he had a sense of walking on black waters. The furrows dipped and rose, his unsteady feet were treading a kind of heavy earthen surf.

Above all, he remembers breathing the earth, that overpowering odor of “wet and wild,” the released soul of the soil.



That world of the child, measured by later times, was small, restricted. It held before him a truth, which the times would reveal as partial indeed. Which is to say, he thought the whole world was like his world. He thought plowing the earth was the normal function of humans, that the odor of the earth was of soil, not of blood or brimstone.

He had much to learn.

Years later, he saw his four brothers enlisted for war. And the truth, the reversal of the oracle of Isaiah, struck. The war was, in the cruelest of phrases, world war, total war. “For the duration,” they said, the able bodied must lay down the plow and take up the sword.

Even that awful fact did not exhaust the event of war. In effect, the plows were not abandoned to rust and rot. “Lend lease” the plows, was a war cry. So the plows were beaten into swords. Overnight, swords sprang up in the furrows, those first shoots of a harvest of blood. It was wartime. Swords had become the very symbol, the only accoutrement, of the human. The swordless, the unarmed (and much more, the disarmed), were simply less than human. They were stigmatized, the shirkers, deserters, draft evaders. They were hounded, ostracized, jailed.

And if here and there, in Europe and Asia, a plow turned up the earth in those years, it turned up — corpses, land mines, and the discarded, rusted tools of peace.



During the war, the nation was conferring a new name on my brothers. They were no longer farmers, steel workers, students. They were warriors. That was their honor, the new vocation conferred on them by holy mother state. That this was a shocking contrast to former, life-giving work was ignored. Their lives took on a new static beat, the beat of a muffled drum, or a muffled heart. Their lives, like their clothing, went from multiform to uniform. So did their minds, cowed and obedient, their civil baptism. Now they were pledged to kill, or to support those who killed, or to die.



The boy learned something else. He learned a cruel new climate in which he must henceforth somehow live. The air froze, the wind was always from the north. It was not yet a nuclear winter, and yet the air was like a sword at the throat. No more springtime. The future would offer no climate of peace, only war, always war, hot or cold. Hot war, Korea, Vietnam, Grenada, Panama, Nicaragua, Iraq, Afghanistan, a litany of loss and shame; and cold war in between and ever since. Never a season for plowing, always the season of the sword.



He had much to learn, and he so slow a learner! It came to this: As long as the sword was in hand, the human vocation was violated. The God he had been taught of, whose name he revered, God of peace, God of life, this One lent neither presence, approval, nor blessing on the course of the world. It was perpetual wartime. Other gods, Mars or Vulcan or Jupiter, were in horrid charge, worldwide.

This is the way it went in the boy's lifetime.

For decades, the gods mocked and mimed the former times, the times of peace. They plowed the earth with a sword blade. Then they sowed the earth with dragons' teeth — nuclear mines, bunkers, laboratories. And there sprang up a new and unheard-of race — nuclear warriors.



Thus was a new history forged, an utterly spurious normalcy, a new sin. The new sin was the original sin in a new form, newly original.

And most appalling of all, conceived in the sin of war, a new species of human was born. This genetic mutation celebrated the new times of the gods of war. The newly born were the normalized inhuman.

This phenomenon, the “new human,” as presented and authenticated, was a permanent figure of terror. He, she, it made no difference. They had never known a time of peace or the art of peace. The human was now one with the warrior.

All other forms of the human, those which long centuries of travail and glory had created, were placed in question. And that was the least of it, and only the start, making traditional and honored forms of the human obsolete. What must occur, as the leaders well knew, and the people came to know, was ordered: The formerly human must be derided, and then declared extinct. We must be get used to murder. The prohibition against murder must be removed from the Decalogue. The Sermon on the Mount must be expunged. The believing human, the compassionate human, the just human, above all, the peacemaking human—these must become peripheral to the main chance. They must be held suspect, indicted or jailed. They are to be judged—in the human race, but not of it.

And what of the nations, more specifically, of the warmaking nations? Under such assault, for a long generation, the assembly of humans became, in concert, a suicide club, a mutuality of perfectly balanced hostilities, teetering, bickering, lying, invading, cozening, controlling. The nations fulfilled to the letter, the dark description of the inhuman in Paul’s letter to the Christians of Rome.

The ecology of the world too was monstrously altered. It became a forest of drawn swords, laid to the throats of the living.



And still, that oracle of Isaiah.

Heartening, despite all. The oracle was issued in a time analogous to our own. The time of Isaiah was just as dangerous, petrifying to the spirit, mindless, captive to illusion, appallingly belligerent. Indeed, successive wars have merely underscored once again the ancient stereotype and impasse. A world at war, a world prepared for another war, a world grown inept in the uses and skills of peace.

An unlikely time to issue a word of hope!



Indeed, the worst time, Isaiah dares imply, is the apt time! The kairos of God, the epiphany of God's hope, is exactly the time when our hands drop in helplessness, when all resources fail. The time when little can be done, when the new gods own the world—this is exactly the time of the toppling of those unsteady thrones!

If only we believed!



I summon to our side the suffering servants of the oracle, those who have taken the hammer in hand, and beaten the nuclear sword into a plowshare. I summon Helen Woodson, mother of seven. Sentence: twelve years. Summon the Fathers Kabat, Carl and Paul. Sentences: twelve and eight years. Summon Larry Cloud Morgan. Sentence: eight years. Summon Richard Miller. Sentence: four years. Summon Darla Bradley, Jean Gump, Larry Moreland, Ken Rippetoe. Sentences: eight years. Summon John Volpe. Sentence: seven years. Summon my brother Philip. Accumulated sentence: eleven years. Summon Sisters Carol, Ardeth, and Jackie. Sentences: two and three years. Summon all the Plowshares resisters across the land, sisters and brothers in Australia, Germany, Netherlands, England, Scotland, Ireland.

Presente! I summon them to our side, to our worship and intercession—sisters and brothers, Christians and Jews, prisoners and ex-prisoners, witnesses of the oracle. Summon them all—parents and grandparents, nuns and priests, Catholic Workers, missionaries, chaplains, teachers. Summon them to our side. Ignored as they are by the media, derided by prosecutors, scorned and punished by judges, their fate of no great concern to churches and synagogues.

These women and men have made a beginning in the sorry and thankless task of fidelity to the oracle. No great claim, and yet through the courage of a few, the claim is verified once more. They have made a human future less unlikely for all. They lay their hammer to the sword, and the beginning of a new creation has dawned in our terrifying world.

The sword is turned aside, the plow renews the earth.