

# What does peace mean to you?

By Brockenshire Lemiski

My name is Brockenshire, and you may remember me as the charming musician who, each week, would sit in that corner and play my guitar with the band. I've attended Trafalgar for nearly eight years, and standing here, I see many familiar faces; and new faces as well.

In September, I moved to Kitchener, to start a new job. Dress shoes, a desk, and an honest-to-goodness paycheque. Truly, I have left university. Despite my best efforts, I seem to be growing up.

I work for Project Ploughshares – and anyone familiar with both my last name and the Ukrainian language will be struck by the coincidence. Yes, Lemiski means Ploughshares. I suppose I should be thankful I'm not named Harvey or McDonald...

But ploughshares means something more. Inspired by the vision of peaceful transformation foretold in the book of Isaiah, peace movements around the world have rallied around the image of a ploughshare. Project Ploughshares was established 35 years ago as the peace research centre of the Canadian Council of Churches. It is a non-governmental organization working to advance policies and actions to prevent war and armed violence, and build peace. We encourage governments to redirect resources away from militarization towards the promotion of disarmament, diplomacy, and human rights.

Project Ploughshares has a partnership with the Presbyterian Church in Canada, which allows them to hire one intern per year. I am that intern. As part of my work, I organize and deliver presentations to faith groups around the GTA. Two weeks ago, I was at St. Andrew's Toronto, and in early November, Reverend Karen Pozios and I hosted a youth group event at Dixie Presbyterian Church. In my conversations with Reverend Kristine, she raised the bar, and today, I find myself here, on the second Sunday of Advent, the Sunday of Peace.

In past talks, I asked 'what does peace mean to you?' Take a moment to think about that question. Is it more than the absence of war? Is peace an internal or external state? Do we find peace? Do we make peace? Do we live peace?

Hippocrates was a Greek physician, regarded as the father of western medicine. He lived twenty-five hundred years ago, and little is known about his life and writing, except for the Oath that bears his name, commonly remembered as 'Do no harm'. Today's reading from Isaiah ends with a Hippocratic triumph. *Nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war anymore!*

‘Do No Harm’. Those three words have been one of the guiding principles of healthcare for thousands of years. It has also become a guiding principle of humanitarianism. Do no harm. Can that simple phrase be enough to guide us towards peace for our time?

My aunt and uncle live in a large house full of fragile antiques. In their family home filled with delicate china, ‘Do No Harm’ is a suitable code of conduct – in my head, it roughly translates to ‘Don’t do anything’. The prudent action would seem to be to sit on one’s hands, and *no sudden moves*.

However, our lives tend to be more complicated. We read news stories of civil war in Syria, rebel assaults in Congo, and armed conflict in Mali. In our communities, we are saddened by stories of schoolyard and cyber bullying, broken homes, and shattered relationships. At Project Ploughshares, I’m involved in issues of firearms legislation and domestic violence in the Caribbean. My colleagues wrestle with issues such as nuclear weapons and the international arms trade. In the face of these challenges, it is not enough to sit tight and simply *do no harm*. Martin Luther King Jr., in his fight against racial segregation, wrote: ‘Human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless effort of many’.

Consider the word ‘peacebuilding’ as opposed to ‘peacekeeping’. Both are valued approaches in the field of humanitarianism, but there is a distinction. ‘Peacebuilding’ recognizes the unfinished, uncertain aspects of any peace. It recalls the exertion of a physical process, and awakens memories of construction, of sweat and sore muscles.

There is a sculpture outside the United Nations building in New York City. Cast in bronze by Evgeniy Vuchetich, and given by the Soviet Union to the United Nations, it represents the transformation envisioned in Isaiah. A massive, muscled worker, heaving and straining, pounds the metal tip of his weapon. *They shall beat their swords*. I’ve never wielded a forger’s hammer, but I can call to mind the prototypical blacksmith: a brawny, bearded man surrounded by flames, soot, and steel. Compared to houses of antique glassware, the work of peace is positively thunderous. Maybe it’s time to rethink our old ideas, and go beyond fluttering doves and the clichéd ‘world peace’ responses of idealistic pageant hopefuls.

Back in 2003, the drums of war were beating. Jean Chretien was facing pressure to commit troops to Iraq. The Canadian Council of Churches, with the support of Project Ploughshares and Kairos – both ecumenical agencies of the Canadian Council of Churches initiated the ‘Prepare for Peace in Iraq’ campaign. Letters were written to the Prime Minister and other members of parliament, and over forty thousand Canadians endorsed the position of the Church – that it was legally and morally wrong to enter the war. My friend was part of a 10,000-person strong anti-war march in Toronto. In Montreal, 100,000 people protested in the streets. Jean Chretien stated that the weight of Canadian voices, including those of the Canadian Council of Churches campaign, influenced his decision to refrain from supporting the U.S. led war.

*They shall beat their swords into ploughshares.* What does it take to convince a nation to reject war? Avoidance of military force is a noble goal, but as the 2003 protests demonstrated, collective inaction can be the consequence of individual devotion, individual action in the name of peace.

As we approach Christmas, we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, the Prince of Peace. We attend church, deck the halls, fill fridges with eggnog and visit friends and relatives. As the Candle of Peace was lit this morning, we heard the tension between waiting and acting, the coming reign of peace, and our work towards that day.

Do we find peace? Do we make peace? It's not an either/or question. The duality presented in Isaiah reminds us of our essential participation. Yes, nations will lay down their arms, but while we wait for that day, we *shall beat out swords into ploughshares*. Amen.

*Brockenshire Lemiski was Project Ploughshares Presbyterian Church in Canada's Peace and Human Security Intern from September 2012 through April 2013.*