

Unless

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For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 1 Corinthians 1:18

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. Isaiah 2:4

A Massive Ordnance Air Blast bomb, nicknamed by the U.S. military as the Mother of All Bombs, would make an unwieldy plowshare. At 21,000 lbs, it would require a few more oxen than most farmers own. It does, however, come with its own GPS system already included, a nice bonus in today's high tech farming economy. As for pruning hooks, we might look into melting the M-16, the world's most manufactured and employed semi-automatic weapon. Made of aluminum and steel, the eight pounds would render three or four functional pruning hooks at least. Of course, you don't own either of those, do you? First, where would you put it? Second, the neighbors would frown. It's likely you own something intended for security though, if not a Colt .45, then a 401k, if not a WMD, then an ATI system, if not a telescopic lens, then a tenured professorship.

Security's not bad: I wear my seatbelt; I watch my wife walk to her car when it's dark; I install rails for my girls' bunkbeds; I save for a rainy day; I lock my door at night and put the chain on. Security is a seductive idol though, easily becoming the thing we place our trust in instead of God.

As we celebrate this season of Easter, a season marked by Christ's announcement of peace to disciples in a locked room, I invite you to rethink the way fear interrupts the peace of your life, the way it diverts your trust in God into trust in a weapon, a portfolio, an education, a job. Easter is an invitation to another way, a narrow way, a way that seems paved with foolishness. Pruning hooks are no match for spears after all. They certainly won't keep you off a cross if a cohort of Romans comes for you. But this way of foolishness promises something more, something eternal: a resurrection, an end to that which frightens us most, an end to death.

It is a promise so extravagant that it is so easily discarded. If only God's power were as shocking as a mushroom cloud, if only the enemies of love were rendered as helpless by love as by land mines, then the promise might have teeth. Instead, God entrusted this promise to a helpless infant, a precocious boy, a romantic dreamer who riddles his sermons, a messiah whose army can't even pick up a plowshare to defend him, a revolutionary who won't revolt.

Foolish. It all seems like such a foolish promise. Unless you are being saved. Then it is the power of God. For then you understand with Paul, a man who knew the glint of a sword in his hand, the heft of a rock in his palm, that God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, that God's weakness is stronger than human strength. Because it's when the weapon, the portfolio, the education, the jobs fail us, it's when we're desperate, afraid, and in agony, that the helpless infant who matured into a

messiah without swords and spears comes to save us from ourselves.

And for those who have been saved, we shake our heads and wonder how this happens, how this prince of peace still lives, how he stretches across millennia with a word of comfort or hope, how he opens our eyes to the lies that resources and force are what drive the world, how he emboldens us to meet the threats of danger with smiles of love, how he cultivates our trust until we believe a single breath of his can transform massive bombs into multitudes of bread and M-16s into myriads of fish, how he remakes us in a way that seems like loss to everyone else but seems like purification to us, how in stripping things away from us he shows us our true selves, and how he does the same to himself, ultimately transforming a symbol of death, the cross, into a symbol of abundant life. How foolish this must all seem. Unless.

If faith is a casual matter for you, I'd like to thank you for being here today. If it all seems like foolishness, but you're determined to honor a mother or pacify a spouse by being here... well, I understand that. I make you an invitation though (your heart can stop palpitating, you won't be coming forward). The invitation is this: when you find yourself lost, when you peer into your life and wonder about its meaning, when all of your security systems collapse, when your heart cleaves in two because you've forgotten how to love until it's too late, when the medication no longer manages the depression, when you're terrified of what happens in your next session with your therapist, when the doctors can't figure out what's happening with your child, when even breathing seems a chore, when little is left, when you are perishing, then I invite you to consider the foolishness again. It has the power to save that nothing else has.

Here's why I'm a fool for Christ: because my daughter's appendix ruptured and my pension was useless, the locks on my door were useless, the airbags in my car were useless, my job was useless. My health insurance was useful, but not comforting to me in the dread moments of the interim. For that, useless. There are pieces of life we simply cannot manage, that we cannot secure in bubble wrap, that we cannot lock away in safety deposit boxes. Our lives are vulnerable, no matter our preparations against the troubles. What sustained me when I waited through those horrible nights was that Christ would never abandon my girl—even if the worst were to happen and she didn't make it, Christ would not abandon her—and that Christ would never abandon me.

Here's why I'm a fool for Christ: because I lay in a bed with pneumonia, my second child soon to be born, graduation a now ambiguous event, no place to work, expecting any moment to have to go into an ICU, and it was Christ who came to me and soothed me, who reminded me that I'm always in his care. That I'm never alone.

Here's why I'm a fool for Christ: because when I sat in a therapist's chair and untangled my fear that if I weren't a success, I wouldn't be loved, it was God's laughter I heard in the background—"My child, my child, I will always love you." In these moments, a minute presence mushrooms like a cloud in the midst of our torment, an everlasting presence we seldom nurture, a visitation of the spirit that buoys our very existence, a companion. The love of Christ is real, it's eternal, it abides, and when everything else is stripped away, it is all we have left.

The message about the cross might seem foolishness to those who can layer themselves in protections, who can purchase the idols that thwart the pain of life,

but to us who are being saved, whose layers of protection have been breeched, it is the power of God. Indeed, it is even more. It is the promise that we can live without those protections, because those protections not only deaden the pain we feel, but they also deaden our joy.

The good news is that we don't need them. The good news is that even the worst that can happen, even death, does not master us. This is what the Easter story is about. God came among us to love us fully, to show us a still more excellent way—a foolish way. Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. When someone strikes you, turn the other cheek. Give all you have to the poor so that your possessions no longer possess you. Lay down your life so that you might gain it. And lo, I am with you, even to the end of the age—even to the hospital bed, even in the unemployment line, even when all of your security systems collapse, even when your heart cleaves in two because you've forgotten how to love, even when the medication no longer manages the depression, even when the doctors can't figure out what's happening with your child, when even breathing seems a chore, even when you are perishing. It seems like a foolish promise, a foolish basis for all of life, unless you are perishing, unless it is all you have left to rely on, and then it is the power of God to save. This is my invitation to you, look to God instead of the M16, look to God instead of the portfolio, look to God instead of the bottle, and when it seems impossible that you will be comforted, you will be comforted. When it seems that nothing can save you, you will be saved. When it seems halfwitted that this upside down life is anything other than a fool's errand, you will find such profound meaning in loving others that you will wonder that you ever pursued security when you could have pursued peace.

There is nothing left to fear. Death has been overthrown. The Prince of Peace has prevailed. He is here.

Christ has risen!