

A sermon delivered by
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The Church of the Transfiguration
1 East 29th Street, New York, NY
Sunday, December 2, 2007
The First Sunday of Advent

[Isaiah 2:1-5](#)
[Romans 13:8-14](#)
[Matthew 24:37-44](#)
[Psalm 122](#)

Wounded Veterans

For the first time in American history, 90% of the wounded veterans returning from war survive their injuries (according to HBO documentary, [Alive Day](#)). What is interesting to me about this is that the high rate of survival may be linked to newer and better technology. Similarly, the high rate of injury is likely connected to newer and better technology. Is technology the problem? No. The way it is used is the problem.

What would happen if the U.S. focused its resources for war on efforts for healing? What would happen if the entire world community were to take this up?

This is Isaiah's vision of the Kingdom of God

“In the days to come...
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 has a vision of transforming technology for death into technology for life. Instead of using swords and spears for death and destruction, how about turning them into plowshares and hooks and using them to produce food to feed the hungry, to sell for economic relief from poverty.

In an [interesting article](#) in the New York Times about a year ago, David Leonhardt wrote about “What \$1.2 Trillion Can Buy.”

It can buy either a war in Iraq or the following:

- doubling of cancer research
- treatment for every American whose diabetes or heart disease is now unmanaged
- global immunization campaign to save millions of children's lives
- universal preschool for every 3- and 4-year-old child across the country

- reconstruction efforts for the city of New Orleans
- and *still* more money would be left over

Neither tool – the sword nor the ploughshare – is good or evil. Technology is morally neutral. What makes it good or evil – light or dark – depends upon the purposes for which it is used. And the purposes are determined by the desires of the human heart.

The gospel message – the good news – today and always is that we don't have to use our technologies for war and death. We can “lay down our sword and shield, down by the riverside,” as the [old Negro spiritual](#) says, because a great light has come and is coming to us.

Today, on this first Sunday of Advent, we begin anticipating the coming of Christ at Christmas. We do that by lighting one candle on the Advent wreath. That tiny light reminds us of several things. First, that Christ, the prince of peace, is coming soon and that war will end and peace shall reign. Second, and not unrelated, that single candle reminds us of simple lesson: **a little bit of light goes a long way.**

Dixie Caverns in Virginia

Near my hometown of Roanoke, VA there is an attraction called [Dixie Caverns](#). It is a cavern that was discovered in 1920 by a little boy's curious dog that fell into a hole on the side of a hill. The boy and his friend looked down the hole with a flash light and spotted the dog some 20 to 50 feet below the surface. Upon further inspection they found a deep cavern full of natural beauty and wonder: stalactites dripping from the ceiling and stalagmites climbing from the floor - true feats of nature that are hundreds of years old. Three years later they named that cavern after the dog they hunted for and found, Dixie. And ever since then Dixie Caverns has been open to the public for tours.

I've toured it twice and always find one particular aspect of the tour fascinating. They have artificially lit the cavern in order to highlight its natural beauty. But at the end of the tour they turn out all the lights. A blinding darkness quickly descends upon you. Suddenly your pupils dilate to compensate for the absence of light. It's as if light is water and the pupil is the dry, parched tongue of a man stranded on a desert island. The eye longs for a speckle of light to bring relief from the blinding darkness. The darkness is so heavy and thick that it feels like a lead vest that a Radiologist places on you before you have an x-ray. It weighs you down and takes away your ability to move or self-direct. It is a suffocating darkness.

The darkness imposes limitations on you that are oppressive and painful. You feel enslaved by it. But, when you think you can't take it anymore, the tour guide illuminates the cavern with a single ray of light from his tiny flash light. The small beam of light sends the darkness scrambling back to the recesses of the cavern and the blinding, suffocating, oppressive darkness ends. A little bit of light goes a long way. The light brings forth relief and a new sense of hope. I tell this story to underscore the point that a little bit of light goes a long way.

When we begin to hear about ending wars, global poverty, and other gigantic world issues it can be overwhelming. So let's focus on the small things. What can little 'ol me and you do in the face of overwhelming works of darkness, as St. Paul might call them? He suggests that we put on the armor of light, which is love. Here is one example of it.

Frank's Deli

When I first moved to New York City a few years ago, one of the first stores I found was a little corner grocery store and deli known as [Frank's Deli](#). It is right across the street from the [General Theological Seminary](#) and most everybody in the community goes there at least 3 times a week – usually for coffee and a bagel in the morning. Frankie doesn't sell the best coffee or bagels in the New York City and his groceries are priced a little high. But still, everybody shops there. Frankie has been there for over 30 years. He is a short man about 5'5, thin on top, always smiling, and calls everybody "Poppy." "Hey Poppy" he says as you walk in the door. It didn't take me long to figure out why everybody shops there. On one occasion I was 50 cents short for the sandwich I ordered. I told him I would run home and get the money and come right back. He said, "Hey Poppy, don't worry." And he gave me the sandwich. On another occasion I ordered a couple of sandwiches and he overcharged me two dollars. I questioned him about the cost of the items and he reiterated the same total, smiling in his usual friendly way. I knew he had added wrong, but I decided to let it go since he had helped me and so many others before. Later that day he saw me walking down the street and he stopped me. He told me that he had overcharged me and the \$2 was waiting for me at the store. At that moment, I began to realize why we all shop there despite the fact that the coffee is not so great and the prices are a little high. It is because Frankie is a kind, honest, trustworthy man that believes in community. I was especially touched one night before I was to fly to Alabama for Christmas. It was freezing outside and I needed to grab a quick dinner and run to the ATM to pick up cab fare for the trip to the airport. I called Frankie up and asked him if he accepted checks. He said it depends on who is writing the check. I gave him my name and he said, "Hey Poppy, for you I will accept a check." He told me I could write it over the amount for dinner so that I would not have to go to the ATM machine 4 blocks away in the cold, harsh winter night. His small acts of trust and kindness bring warmth to my heart and make me feel fully human. And it is not because I am special that he does this. He does it to everyone.

The chapel at the seminary is quite old and small. In fact, when you graduate you are only allowed to invite one guest so everyone may have a seat. There are a few exceptions though. Bishops, distinguished theologians, and honorary guests have reserved seats at graduation. For several years, there has been one seat reserved for a guy that doesn't have a Ph.D. and he is not a Bishop. But the light of Christ shines forth so forcefully from his heart that the seminary community recognizes it and decided to honor him. Frankie is the only non-seminary related person to have a reserved seat at the GTS graduation year after year. I revel in the irony that an unlearned store owner sits among Bishops and theologians because he embodies the very thing they preach and teach: the light of Christ.

Frankie teaches us that you don't have to go make a major life change – like become a priest – or do something so big you earn a Nobel Prize for it, like Al Gore or Desmond Tutu. Since a little bit of light goes a long way, we can simply let it shine in our present place in life, in our current vocation, with the ones closest to us. The real test of our faith is how it is lived out among our partners, spouses, best friends, and closest family members anyway. If we can do it well there then we will almost certainly change the world in the process.

And that brings me back to where we began. This war rages on. It is hard to see an end in sight. Is it really possible that small acts of kindness, trust, and charity can bring an end to this war or end other world problems? I hope so.

My hope is in the knowledge of the coming of Christ. The kingdom of God, the reign of the prince of peace, is already in our hearts and inspires hope for a better world.

The gospel lesson encourages us to: “be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.” When he comes may he find us wearing the armor of light, turning swords into ploughshares, and loving our neighbors as he loves us.

AMEN.