



MINISTER
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First Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 2:1-5

Waiting, Watching, Wondering

Intro Today as we enter Advent, we begin a new church year. Each year, the lectionary starts with passages about the second Advent, or coming of God. We have just heard in Matthew that we will not know the hour of this arrival, yet we are to prepare. In our Old Testament reading Isaiah envisions what the coming of God will look like, he sees a world of people committed to divine worship, equal justice, and universal peace. Let us listen for God's word as it comes to us through Isaiah's vision.

As Christians, during advent we wait and watch and wonder at all that takes place in Bethlehem, when God first came to us as a child. This Sunday, as we begin the journey toward the cradle, we reminded of God's second coming, the promise from God that there will be a completeness to God's will. That is what Isaiah is seeing, as he describes "the word" he had from God. Isaiah sees a world full of justice and peace, where the mountain of God is a place that all nations will stream to, and justice will be decided by God and not humans. It is a vivid and compelling image, that many long for. It is an image that may be dismissed by some as pure fantasy or as the result of an over-active imagination. But it is ours to hold and to consider as we begin Advent.

This message about the future of the world, this "vision" for Isaiah is a promise and a hope to sustain the people of God in every generation. It is a clear and unshakable promise that one day God will be exalted, one day all nations will recognize God and seek to learn God's ways. And God's judgment will bring in universal and everlasting peace on earth. God shares this with Isaiah has given God's "word" on this. While it feels a little dangerous to try to speak from God's perspective, "this is the way it is going to be" God is saying. It is a promise, and one we can celebrate.

While it may sound way too implausible, or "Utopian" to be possible, can we stop and wonder what if it were real? What would it mean for God to be exalted and

for all nations to respond?

Can we imagine a spiritual revival sweeping across the world, not in the old ninetieth century kind of "get em saved kind of way" but in a deep personal and societal recognition that God exists, God is good, God is one, and God requires justice and peace. How would it be if the streets of Belfast

were filled with children of all faiths playing together, think of Bosnia resounding only with the sounds of song. Think of Jerusalem and the West Bank as places where people worship freely, with neighbor respecting neighbor. Think of the gated communities and the ghettos of America dropping all that would divide and separate people and there be no more hatred, suspicion, or war. With all of the fragmentation of our world, ethnically, religiously, and economically, when we hear this promise does a lump rise into our throat? Do we even dare think this is possible? Can it be true? Will this really happen? We wait, we wonder, and through our doubts or uncertainties, God says yes.

From God's perspective this passage is a promise, from our human perspective, this text is a prayer uttered in the midst of the often tragic and painful circumstances of life. This text is a message of deep and profound yearning and longing. The vision of Isaiah shows to us our deepest desire to live in a world of justice and peace. This incredible promise is before us, with all its moving imagery of peace and reconciliation, and yet we are

painfully aware of how we live in a human condition marked by betrayal and mistrust. In many respects, ours is an age of broken promises.

We do not have to look far to see how we have experienced hurt and betrayal in our own lives, and we don't have to look far to see nation putting its self interests above the needs of other nations.

At the heart of God's promise is the proclamation that God has not deserted the very humans who, in their freedom, have chosen to make swords and spears. We have focused on making war, striving to claim too much for ourselves, forgetting the abundance that the earth's fields provide, if we only would make plowshares. We have been letting the vines of earth grow tangled and sapped of vital life because they are un-pruned as we quibble over which nation is greater than another. God has not deserted humans who, in our freedom, have chosen to neglect the tasks of pruning and in the process have become entangled by the disappointments, doubts, and sometimes despair that mark our days.

God has not deserted humans who, in our freedom, have chosen to let conflict and hostility mark our congregations or causes, our homes and hearts. God stays with us all the while, and God beckons us with a word of reconciliation and promise.

We look at the world around us and ask who can we trust? We long for a word

that we can trust.

We long for a promise that will not be broken. Dare we place our trust in this promise from God?

Especially when it seems so farfetched? It is everything we lack, everything we long for. But are we are people who can trust promises like this? If so, how are we to proceed? What are we to do?

Isaiah's vision provides us with a profound clue. We are issued an invitation-one that need to taken to heart at all times, but especially during this time of Advent. In verse 5, "O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!" Here God's promise and our prayers are put together.

On the first Sunday of Advent, we are not invited to blindly trust the promises of God, or to give in to a skeptical mistrust that pushes God's promises to some kind of apocalyptic hereafter. Rather, we are invited simply to put one foot in front of the other and begin walking in the light that we have received. Our mistrust may not be overcome, but, in spite of it, we can begin walking.

The metaphor "let us walk in the light of the Lord" implies incremental action taken together through which we live into the light provided by God's law and by God's promises. The promise will be made good as we walk together into the light that it casts on the pathway before us.

Walking together, in small steps, that is how we will come to enter the promised world of God. It is when we are part of a hunger walk, an AIDS walk, building a home with Habitat for Humanity, delivering a meal, writing a letter, offering a prayer for another in need, confronting a prejudice or welcoming a stranger. This is where advent begins.

Advent is a time of waiting. As we begin this season of advent, we wait expectantly to celebrate the birth of the Christ child. but we are not waiting as though we know nothing more of Christ.

We know about his life and ministry, we know of his death and resurrection. In advent we wait for the birth, but we also wait for his second advent. We bear witness to the promise that God will come again the completeness of time. That is what Isaiah is speaking of, when he writes of the "word" he saw. Nations not judging others, but all streaming toward God. Israel was expecting a Messiah to come and change the world. And each one of us as individuals is longing for a savior to come and change our world. To each of us, God comes.

We will know it when we see destructive patterns made into constructive ones. We might argue that literally beaten swords make lousy plowshares, and spears are not the best pruning hooks. Yes that's true. but with God anything is possible. All that we have right now, our strengths and weakness can all be taken to God to be transformed.

I remember a most powerful retreat I was part of many years ago. Where a priest was speaking about the Advent story and asked about where our Bethlehems' were. What in us felt like it was a spear or sword, that was used for destruction, (perhaps it was our anger, or unhealthy habits) What was that place that felt most removed from God, what is that place so far off the beaten road, so far from the light that we may have long ago given up on it becoming anything other than what it is.

The he said imagine this place being transformed by the presence of the God's light and love.

Imagine Christ being born there. Imagine God coming to live there, and grow and change that in inexplicable ways. Perhaps we can, I think for many that may be too great a thought, it couldn't be. Can't be. That is what God is promising, that is what Isaiah is speaking about. Something that is not yet, but could be with God.

This is how God comes to the most unexpected of places, in the most unexpected of ways. In first steps, in baby steps, in every step that leads toward the light of God's ultimate reign on earth.

This Advent, let us walk in the light to the Lord. Amen.