

Hopeful Imagination

Isaiah 2:1-5, Matthew 24:36-44
Advent I; December 1, 2019

Text

Isaiah 2:1-5, The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. 2 In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. 3 Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. 4 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. 5 O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!

Matthew 24:36-44, 36 "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 37 For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 38 For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, 39 and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. 40 Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. 41 Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. 42 Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. 43 But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. 44 Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

Reflection

At last, finally we are moving into the season of Advent. Personally, I have been longing for Advent; I wanted to move into a new season of my life – with clear vision and emotionally grounded mode of life. I wanted momentum for a new beginning. I think Advent is a time, not only for me, but probably for all of us, to refresh our life - to look at it from another perspective - God's viewpoint. From a scriptural viewpoint, we may need to look carefully into our lives, our faith community and beyond, to see and be inspired by the wisdom of our forebears who were ignited by God's Spirit.

Regrettably, this season is filled with many distractions, most of them secular. Many of us may have wish lists for Christmas; our children or grandchildren, for example, keep on reminding us that they believe in Santa and that surely he will be coming to our house again this year. We may be busy making or purchasing gifts and decorating our homes inside and out, preparing for Christmas dinners and parties, or planning to travel far away to where our families live to spend our holidays with them. Even though we find ourselves constantly busy emotionally and physically, let us pause and take a deep breath at least for the next four Sundays to re-focus and reflect on the meaning of Advent from another point of view.

Sung Response: Hope Is a Star, verse 1 from *Voices United 7*

Hope is a star that shines in the night, leading us on till the morning is bright.

When God is a child there's joy in our song.

The last shall be first and the weak shall be strong, and none shall be afraid.

One of the readings for the first Sunday in Advent this year begins with the beautiful image offered us from the prophet Isaiah. He lived in a very difficult time in the southern kingdom of Judah in the early eighth century BCE. War was a nearly permanent reality of daily life, primarily because of the nation's small size and valuable location. This parcel of land was smaller than Vancouver Island, less than 1/3 of the Island; ancient Israel was surrounded on all sides by nations who wanted to own it. Biblical scholars remind us that in the lives of the ancient Israelites, there was only "war time" and "preparing-for-war time."

At the time of the prophet Isaiah, Judah was so weak that northern Israel after the division of the country and Syria to the north both became serious threats. Even in a time when the threat of national destruction was very real, Isaiah envisioned a wondrous time of God's rich involvement in the affairs of the world. In this context, Isaiah dares to dream of a time when all nations will go up to the mountain of God. "In days to come God may teach us God's ways that we may walk in God's path" (v. 3). That path is then described in symbolic images. "The nations and peoples shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks" (v. 4). Weapons used to kill one's enemies are now transformed into farming, life-giving tools. The ways of death become the ways of life. "Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore." It isn't hard then to imagine how the people of Judah must have felt over the centuries in the face of threat, destruction and exile by one empire after another. More than 500 years before the time of Jesus, they listened to this dream, imagined this vision of the future, and then, they looked at their once-beautiful city, Jerusalem, burned and battered by powers that must have appeared unstoppable. Still, they held on to their trust in the promises of the One who is more powerful than any empire and any destructive force; this week's passage is Isaiah's recitation of God's promise of a future very different from that which seemed to be inevitable.

Sung Response: Hope Is a Star, verse 2 from *Voices United 7*

Peace is a ribbon that circles the earth, giving a promise of safety and worth.

When God is a child there's joy in our song.

The last shall be first and the weak shall be strong, and none shall be afraid.

Recently we often have had two babies with us during our worship services. Last Sunday a baby was dancing while we were singing the hymns, and sometimes, we could hear the sound of their voices, laughing or crying during the service. I think this is a wonderful sign that our "home" is full of life. We hope we grow together with our babies. As parents experience great joy raising their children and hope for their future, we too have hope for their and our future. Imagine how belonging to a family opens us up to be filled with hopeful imagination. Our days would be filled not only with busyness with the baby, but the excitement of raising the child with hope and joy.

Last week Russ and I went to First United Church in the downtown east end to deliver 1,200 pairs of socks. It has been our commitment to contribute at least 3,000 pairs of socks to First United Church each year since 1998. Nowadays as we enter into the winter season and often

have rainy days, socks are much needed items for people who spend most of their time on their feet outside. Whenever I pass the downtown east side my mind is heavy, but this time there was a difference. We were carrying your gifts for those who needed them. We delivered your gifts! I am waiting for the day when we don't need to make this kind of delivery; I am waiting for the day when everyone lives in their own shelter. Of course that means we have to act with courage to develop a society where that is reality. I am waiting for that day filled with hope, peace, joy and love.

Sung Response: Hope Is a Star, verse 3 from *Voices United 7*

Joy is a song that welcomes the dawn, telling the world that the Saviour is born.

When God is a child there's joy in our song.

The last shall be first and the weak shall be strong, and none shall be afraid.

The writer of the Gospel of Matthew lived in 70 CE, a time of war. The temple, the centre of the Jewish community, had been destroyed by the Romans and the Jews were scattered. Matthew compares this time of war with that of Jesus' trial and crucifixion which had happened about 40 years earlier. Matthew thinks that his fate and his community's future is like that of Jesus in Jerusalem in the days before his death. Living in this tumultuous situation, Matthew says God's reign is coming. Matthew believes that God's promise to God's people is surely coming. The church has taught that that day has not yet been fulfilled. Matthew, however, knows that that day is coming or has already come because he has hope.

That day, filled with hope, peace, joy and love, is surely coming. In this season of expectation and hopeful waiting, let us pause and take a deep breath and reflect on how to live out God's hope for this season of Advent. Advent is a valuable time to learn to imagine and practise God's way, to learn how to walk in God's paths of hope. This season of Advent offers us the space and time to reflect on what is needed to fulfill God's promise of hope for our day. Today we celebrate God's presence as we share communion. The coming Christ invites us to the table. May the food we share here today be the source of abundant life for all God's people in this season of waiting and fulfillment.

Sung Response: Hope Is a Star, verse 4 from *Voices United 7*

Love is a flame that burns in our heart, Jesus has come and will never depart.

When God is a child there's joy in our song.

The last shall be first and the weak shall be strong, and none shall be afraid.

Amen.

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