

1st Sunday of Advent, November 27 2016 Nigel Taber-Hamilton St. Augustine's Freeland.
Isaiah 2:1-5 Romans 13:11-14 Matthew 24:36-44

I remember as a teenager going on a one-day pilgrimage with my church to see Coventry Cathedral. If you haven't seen it it's a striking modern building completed in 1962. On the trip up, as we got to the center of Coventry, I remember being struck by how all the buildings for several miles around the cathedral were new. In my naivete I said to our priest, "why is everything here so new? It's not like at home." And he said, simply, "because of the blitz." Coventry is part of the industrial Midlands of England – the place where the Industrial Revolution started. Coventry is 17 miles east of Birmingham, the larger of the two cities, and the one where, during World War II, a great deal of material for the war effort was produced. Coventry was thus not only a target, but on the direct route for German bombers going to attack Birmingham. So Coventry was a primary and an alternate target. Its city center was obliterated.

You've probably seen pictures of English – and German – cities after the war – more piles of bricks than buildings.

The post-war center of Coventry's a pretty good image for what Isaiah was looking at when he wrote the passage we have today. The People Who Believed God Had Chosen Them had been shocked when their Temple and the city that it called home was utterly destroyed and they, "God's Chosen," had been dragged away to exile. And as a part of that defeat they'd lost everything. It must have been a devastating experience. Many either chose not to return, or – thinking that God had cursed Jerusalem – had decided instead to establish a separate Temple on Mt. Gehezim in Samaria.

It was in that context of utter devastation that Isaiah wrote today's passage. Imagine, for a minute, that he was standing in the ruins of Coventry Cathedral rather than those of the Temple, and hear those words again:

"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. Many peoples shall come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord.....that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.'"

I'm betting that the people who, while looking at the devastation around them, read those words must have thought he was crazy! And I'll bet most of us would have been with them and not with him. After all, the evidence of our eyes – the stark realities of the present times – of every "present time" are often so much more compelling than the imagined possibilities of the Isaiahs of our world!

Yet not only do people of faith continue to work for that vision, but there continue to be encouraging signs that we are all making progress toward its fulfillment. The positive dreams of a redeemed humanity are always much more compelling, in the end, than the dark, deep, gloom of the world's pessimists.

Some evidence for that comes in the second reading today. I think it's striking how much Paul's

admonition to the Roman community sounds as if it's being written in support of Isaiah's vision:

“You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day....”

God's vision, Paul says, is on the horizon. Time to get going! Be mindful of the moment by moment revealing of God's presence and grace in our lives. In contemporary language, those words of Paul could sound like this: ***“Act as if God's realm is here right now! Become a citizen of heaven in your everyday life by your commitments, values, and actions!”***

Both Isaiah (figuratively) and Paul (literally) are calling to us to walk in the light of God. That's not so easy when darkness descends on our hemisphere – not only literally, but figuratively – as the fears of many for a political darkness infect not only our continent but also the European one too.

Isaiah's vision is a gift at this moment for us. Jerusalem, he said – a destroyed city and a despairing people – **will become** a center of spiritual pilgrimage with seekers coming to create, not destroy. “Strangers **will** find a home in the holy city. Refugees **will** experience safety once more. The world's leaders **will** beat their swords into plowshares, war **will** be abolished, and nations **will** no longer plan on destroying on another. Laughter and joy **will** fill the city streets. The days of mourning **will** be a thing of the past as the horizons of God's future beckon us forward.” (Bruce Epperly) That's certainly what happened in Coventry – a majestic new Cathedral was finished in 1962, and has become a center for reconciliation between England and Germany. The hoping and the dreaming that underpinned that rebuilding is the hope and the dream of Advent, when our faith challenges us to go beyond the world as we know it in search of the world as it could be – and should be – if we place God at the center. ***That would be a place of healing, restoration, justice, and Shalom.***

Last week I mentioned that the original meaning of the word *ekklesia* - often translated as “church” was “**political assembly**” and that a genuine *ekklesia en Christo* (Paul's phrase) was a real-world place where we as Christians engage with non-Christians in the affairs of our world by bringing our values to bear on our actions – **we join the personal and political.**

Advent joins the personal and the political. The spirit of Advent invites us to examine our values and lifestyle: “How shall we experience peace in the onslaught of the Christmas season? How shall our Advent be holy and whole-making? What behaviors do we need to change to be part of the peaceful world Isaiah visualizes?” (ibid).

Advent invites us to do this by having an attitude of expectation, hopefulness, and prayerful waiting. Advent calls us to be individuals and a people who already have one foot in God's new age and who imagine ourselves as already being the change we want to see in the world.

May this be your Advent!

Let us pray: Holy God, may we have the strength of our convictions to both pray and act on behalf of your reign. Give us the grace to stay awake and to walk in your light, that we may see what is to be our role in your divine adventure. As we pray so may we live, in your most Holy Name. And the people say: Amen.