

The First Sunday of Advent – Year A – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony – December 1, 2019  
Isaiah 2:1-5, Psalm 122, Romans 13:11-14, Matthe 24:36-44

Today we begin the four Sundays of Advent that lead up to the celebration of the Feast of the Nativity, Christmas. The watchwords of Advent are waiting, anticipation, preparation and hope. I use the term watchword in an older way, not as a slogan or saying but as the word by which a sentinel knew friend from enemy. These watchwords of Advent describe for me what the season signifies and why it is important that we enter into it with intention. They are how we open ourselves once again to a deeper relationship with God and with the incarnate Son, Jesus. In Advent we are offered the opportunity to slow down, savor time and ready ourselves once again to welcome the coming of the Christ Child into a world badly in need of light.

Today, and the next three Sundays, our Hebrew scripture reading comes from the Prophet Isaiah “ The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.” ( 9:2) Familiar words. Or again, “Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.” (7:14). “For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” (9:6) Christians for centuries have seen Jesus as the fulfilling of these words.

For the people of Judah to whom Isaiah originally spoke, these were words of encouragement in the midst of waiting, chaos, anxiety and despair. Isaiah’s words brought a sense of hope to the people in the midst of what seemed to be an impossible circumstance. The words of Isaiah have spoken to Christians across the centuries in all times, but especially in times of anxiety and despair, reminding them of the hope that is theirs and ours in God and God’s care for his people. Hope not in the sense of pious wishes, but in the faith that the impossible is possible with God.

Many years ago, a priest of my acquaintance made the statement that a “text out of context is a pretext.” A clever play on words perhaps, but with a bit of wisdom none the less. Over the next several weeks, in church and out, you are likely to encounter the words of Isaiah seen as foretelling the birth of Jesus the Messiah. It is well to have a context in which to understand how this is true.

Isaiah was active during a time of great instability in Judah and Jerusalem. The greater power of Assyria was swallowing up smaller, weaker countries in an expansionist policy. A period of prosperity and honorable rulers was at an end. Jerusalem was threatened and with it the Temple, the place on earth where God’s presence was known.

Into the anxiety and fear, Isaiah began to speak. This is the first prophet to suggest that God had a plan for the world that embraced all of creation. This was a plan that was inclusive and clear. He spoke to a people who were trying to understand their place and the place of Jerusalem in God’s plan.

Isaiah’s theology, rested on two key points. The first was that Jerusalem was the eternal place of God. The place where God met humanity. For centuries the people had known the

Temple in Jerusalem as that liminal, that thin place between earth and heaven. After the Resurrection, when the Temple had been destroyed by the Romans, Christians remembered the words of Jesus. "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." "...he was speaking of the temple of his body. (John 2:19, 21). Looking back, one could see that the bridge between humans and God was no longer in a place but in a person.

The second foundation of Isaiah's theology was to be found in the importance of a human King to act as regent for God's kingdom on earth. The term regent is understood in this context to mean someone who rules in accordance with the plan and wishes of someone else. The human king that Isaiah had in mind would be from the house the line of David.

This Davidic king would be an instrument of God, and would carry out the plan God had for the world. This king would act for the welfare of the people, particularly those who were oppressed, for widows and orphans; all who were in any kind of pain or trouble. The king Isaiah envisioned would be righteous and just, and would be uniquely empowered by God's spirit. The followers of Jesus saw these qualities in their master. It was in the hope that Jesus was the king they longed for that his followers tried to crown him earthly king. It was in the hope of such a king that they called him Messiah, the anointed one. It was in fear of such a king that the Romans placed the placard above his cross. King of the Jews.

The one who was the bridge to God, was also the one through whom the plan of God would be fulfilled. Jesus was the King about whom Isaiah was speaking. Not only did Jesus speak the word of God, Jesus was the Word of God. God's word is a word of comfort and hope but also a word of action. God's word is a word not only spoken and heard but a word seen. Not only instruction but also action and invitation. The creation story in Genesis demonstrates this truth. "God said let there be light and there was light." A word heard and a word of action. We are more prone to speak of hearing rather than seeing. Engaging God's word with our eyes as well as with our ears, opens new ways of imagining human response. God's word is not only spoken for our hearing but enacted for our doing.

Isaiah and later Jesus, brings us to the point of action and transformation in the speaking of God's word. In a wonderful and hopeful image of peace Isaiah speaks of what human beings have longed for. Beating swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, Instruments of taking life, become instruments of community and blessings. The hope that is here is of a new way of being, what Jesus called the Kingdom of God. Isaiah is envisioning this new kingdom as growing out of all of the nations' coming together in harmony. That is the global level, a level where we by ourselves have very little ability to impact. But together, each responding to God's word, we can make the global vision move toward reality. We can be instruments through which life and community overcome death and isolation. If we see the word, the image that is described and enact it where ever we find ourselves we will bring a piece of God's plan into reality. When I think about this passage, beating swords into plowshares, spears into pruning hooks, I do not think literally of the implements but of what they represent. Where in my life have I been using a sword to achieve an end and thereby taking life out of a relationship when by using a plowshare I can be a part of the community

that sustains life for myself and those around me. When have I used a spear to damage, when a pruning hook to transformed the situation and been a blessing. The invitation is given to each of us to become catalyts of life and growth.

How does this happen, how do we effect such live-giving change in our relationships, families, community and world? Isaiah has the answer, one given in his time and an answer that rings true to us today. "Come let us walk in the light of the Lord."

Advent is the time of waiting and preparation, the time of seeking and finding the light of the Lord in our lives. Come let us begin, one step at a time to seek that light of Christ for which we long.