

Visions of Hope¹

Isaiah 2:1-5 – November 28, 2010
Browns Point United Methodist Church
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Now that Thanksgiving is over, I can't fight it anymore. Christmas is coming, in all of its glory, with all of its drama and stress and busyness and fun. Today we begin the new Christian year with the season of Advent. The word "Advent" literally means "coming" or "arrival," and during this season we prepare for the coming of Christ, for the arrival of the baby in the manger but also the Christ who will come again in glory. And in our preparation, we *wait* with hope, anticipation, joy, and peace.

The problem is that the world isn't waiting. The world isn't observing a holy Advent. The world has been celebrating Christmas since before Halloween. Instead of waiting, hoping, reflecting and preparing for what's to come, the world is shopping, partying, wrapping, eating, caroling, and generally wearing itself out until it is one big ball of anxiety. Now I love Christmas as much as the next guy – but as a pastor, a big part of me wants to shout over the constant din of jingle bells (even though I know it sounds supremely nerdy), "But what about observing a holy Advent?"

It's not that the Christmas preparations are bad or wrong or unchristian. We just bought a Christmas tree. I love my peppermint mochas in the red cups. I love a good Christmas cookie with sprinkles on top. Some of the best music out there is only played at this time of year, and I think it's a shame to only hear it for a few short weeks. None of this is bad stuff – it's just that it's not enough. The gifts, the decorations, the parties, they will never be enough.

At this time of year, we see pictures upon pictures of perfection (or what we imagine perfection to look like): visions of fantasies fulfilled and dreams come true. On television, in store windows, in magazine and newspaper ads, we see beautiful couples showering one another with expensive gifts and looks of absolute adoration – as if that diamond bracelet has simply capped off what was already the world's most complete, deep, perfect love. We see snow-covered landscapes easily traversed by the new cars with the big red bows on them – no sign of weather-related power outages, traffic problems, burst pipes or freezing neighbors – just the perfect beauty of the new-fallen snow. We see sumptuous meals being eaten by beautiful, fashionable, well-groomed, slender families. The dishes on the table are perfectly cooked – and the family doing the eating glows at one another with loving smiles as they use their best manners to pass the green beans while the golden retriever warms himself by the wood-burning fireplace.

And while we know, at least somewhere in our minds, that these are mere dreams of marketers and PR executives, tools of manipulation to convince us that our families, our bodies, our relationships, and our homes could be this perfect, too, if we just purchased *these* items, which happen to be on sale at 3:00 in the morning... we have to admit that a piece of us is captured by these images hook, line, and sinker. A piece of us wants to believe that if *we* have the perfect decorations, and the perfect gifts, and the perfect meals, then our problems will just work themselves out during this joyful – and sometimes painful – season. And we have to admit that

¹ The inspiration for these thoughts comes largely from Stacy Simpson Duke's reflections on Isaiah 2:1-5 in *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 1*, p.2-6.

the reason these cultural messages are so powerful – even when we *know* they're not true – is that **they point to real, profound human longing, to the real yearnings of our hearts.**

But our hearts are longing for more than material things, more than parties and decorations and songs, more than a home and a family that looks nice enough for television. The passage from Isaiah that we heard this morning, which may, at first glance, seem a strange thing to read on the first Sunday of Advent, points to the things **our hearts are actually tuned for:** community, relationship with God, and deep peace.

In Isaiah's vision – something he doesn't just hear but "sees" in his holy imagination – there is a profound sense of community. Mt. Zion, the place of the temple where God lives, will be lifted up above every other mountain. It will take its place in the world; its prominence will be noticeable to *everyone*. And they won't just notice: the nations will stream to that holy mountain, all together. They go *together* to be taught by the God of Jacob, so that *together* they can live as disciples. No one walks alone in this vision. Life is lived in community.

But the community doesn't just hang out on the mountain: they go to be taught by Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God is the Creator and the Judge of all things here, but God is more than that distant cosmic character: God is the teacher, the nurturer of all nations, speaking God's word, teaching God's ways – apprenticing the people so that they might walk in the light. This is not the false instruction and faulty direction we get from the gods of our culture: this is Truth, for which our souls long.

And the word of God will bring forth justice, and justice will bring forth transformation. God doesn't enforce a peace on unwilling people here. This is no cease-fire with sanctions on those who violate the terms. The word of God brings about such transformation that the people themselves beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. They are ruled by justice, so they no longer live in fear and no longer need the tools of war; so they convert them into implements of life, tools that help bring sustenance from the earth. It's not that the nations – or the people – no longer have conflicts. Isaiah's vision doesn't say that they live in perfect harmony. But it says they live in peace; there's no need for them to fight anymore.

The pictures we see during this time of year – yuletide gatherings and happy families – speak to real desires: we long for harmony across divisions, truth to fill our hearts, and relationships that give us life. Our nostalgia for Christmases past and idolization of childlike wonder point to our desire to believe again in things that seem impossible – like a guy in a red suit that delivers gifts to all the children of the world? Sure, but also like love and hope, peace on earth and goodwill to all. We have been so tainted by lives full of disappointment and sorrow, cynicism and doubt, that we point now to the children to believe *for* us that dreams – visions – really can come true.

But somewhere deep within, we know that we are designed for more than peppermint mochas and Christmas trees. We keep pinning our hopes on things that are fleeting, only to be disappointed when the season is over, when our living rooms are strewn with crumpled paper and our sinks are filled with dirty dishes, when we didn't get everything we asked for or perhaps we did, but still there's a feeling of emptiness inside. We Christians go around shouting Jingle Bells with the masses even though our hearts are whispering the words to "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" over and over again. *Because it's easier to believe in feasts and gifts than on the seemingly impossible:* in walking with God, in living in harmony, in a peace so profound that swords can all be beaten into plowshares.

But Christmas, for us, is all about the impossible actually happening: it's about a young girl, a virgin, being visited by an angel and told she will bear the Christ-child – and her response being, “Yes.” It's about this girl and her young husband giving birth to the savior of the world in a stable in Bethlehem, tended not by doctors and technology but by horse manure and hay. It's about the God of the universe wrapping himself in the body of a child, loving us so much that he came as close to us as we are to each other right now. We believe in the impossible.

As I was watching the Macy's Thanksgiving parade on Thursday, keeping an eye out for the cast of Sesame Street with my little girl, I couldn't help but notice again and again the huge sign on the side of the Macy's department store in New York: in glittery lights at least a story tall, it says, simply, “Believe.” And I kept thinking, every time the camera zoomed out and caught a glimpse of that sign, “Believe in what? In what does Macy's want me to believe?” Santa? Jesus? Some nebulous “Christmas spirit”? That the right purchases in their downtown department store might just satisfy the longings of my heart?

And then I realized, in reading this text from Isaiah, that what we believe in this Advent season – what we Christians believe in this Advent – isn't a given. Isaiah paints this beautiful vision of hope for us, in which *all the world* is gathered on the mountain to hear from God. But then he says to the chosen people, to the church, “Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord.” Israel must decide, too, to believe this vision and begin to live it, just as we must decide if we want to stick with Jingle Bells and Black Friday sales, or if our hearts are asking for more. Isaiah is asking us to **believe in the impossible** this season: in diverse communities of love, in a closeness with God like we've never known before, in a peace so profound that implements of death can be converted to tools that give life. These are the things our hearts truly desire. But we must decide to walk in that light, to live in that vision until it's the only reality we know.

So in this season, as we prepare once again for the arrival of Christ, may we open our hearts to believe, with as much childlike wonder as we can muster, in something more than gifts and feasts, more than picture-perfect snowy scenes of Santa and his reindeer. Let us believe in the impossible this season: in God come to earth in the body of a child, in light piercing the darkness, in peace on earth. And let us live toward that vision until it lives in us.

Come, my friends, let us walk in the light of the Lord.

Amen.