

What Were You Expecting?

Pastor Hubert Den Draak, November 27 - 1st Sunday of Advent

Readings: Isaiah 2:1-5 and Matthew 24:36-44 (see at bottom)



About 10 days ago I was at the Home Depot when I bumped into this couple that I know. Lovely people who always seem to have time for a chat. Except this time. This time, they were clearly "on a mission" with no time to lose. When I (quickly) asked them how they were doing, they said they were trying to get ready for Christmas but already felt they were slipping behind. So much to do in so little time. I half-jokingly told them to just skip the Christmas frenzy this year. "Right," he said, "Well, maybe next year", also half-jokingly.

Christmas comes and goes every year, and every year we feel frazzled, disappointed and simply worn out. And every year we vow once again to "start earlier" next time or to "not try and do so much". And every year the season seems to get away on us or take over, and we end up in the same boat as the year before.

Welcome to the season of Advent. Welcome to the first Sunday of the new church year. And if you're a little bit like that couple at the Home Depot, Advent is your friend. It's a time of slowing down and a time of preparation. Advent is a time of the church year in which we... wait. It's not about running around, it's about - waiting.

Now of course if there's one thing we all hate, it's to sit and wait. But the waiting of Advent is not like, say, waiting in the doctor's office, when all you can do is flip through old magazines, or look at other patients and secretly wonder what they're in for, or play games on your smart phone until the batteries die.

Advent waiting is very different. As a colleague (and mother of two) told me, "You know, it's like the kind of waiting that a woman does while she is preparing for her child to be born." There's lots to do, but most of the really important things happen by themselves, there's not much the mother-to-be can do about them - except to prepare herself for it. So all the mother can do is to hope that she and her spouse will be ready when the time is there, when things will never be the way again they were before.

That's probably the best way I ever heard to describe Advent, as a "pregnant time". A time that makes you slow down to think about the things that really matter, a time to slow down and prepare yourself to say farewell to your old life and get ready for a gift that will literally change your life. And as any sleep-deprived new parent will tell you: a changed life is not necessarily an easier life.

And so here we are this First Sunday of Advent to listen what God might be telling us. Now this being Advent and all, you might expect something about a baby in Bethlehem. But nope: instead, we hear a prophet speak of the hope of a world made right once again, because God promised so. We hear passages that are about hope (Isaiah) - *and* waiting (Matthew).

Isaiah wrote his prophecies thousands of years ago - he didn't know anything of the complex issues of our time, like climate change and terrorism and millions of refugees on the move - but he did know about wars and occupation and tyranny and fear. His people lived it every day, and he knew that they needed a reason to hope to help them make it through the tough times they were experiencing, and the even tougher times that were ahead.

And he does so in an unbelievably bold way. He's not trying to sugar-coat terrible event with platitudes like, "When God closes a door, he opens a window." No, he goes directly to the heart of the issue, and the issue is the vicious cycle of violence and injustice and war, a cycle that offers *no* hope whatsoever, only despair and destruction, and yet we don't seem to be able to escape it. And he says, you know what? God has promised to break that vicious cycle. Those instruments of death? They will be turned into plowshares, into tools that bring life. In fact, there will be no need to learn war anymore.

And according to Isaiah and many other prophets, this peace doesn't begin somewhere out of our reach with nations, or kings or presidents; it begins right here on the ground with ordinary people, God's people. *They* will lead the nations and the presidents and the kings to peace by showing and by living out God's reality, by refusing to kill and by taking our own weapons and beating them into oblivion.

This world is full of "realists", and these realists will tell us that God's people are just a bunch naive la-la hippy-dippy dreamers. And I suppose we are; because faith is about believing what we hope for; faith means being sure about what we don't-yet-see but we know is there. it's about believing in a God who transformed death into life, as Jesus showed us. And that same Jesus invites us to join in and do the same, to break that vicious circle of death and help create a gentle circle of life.

If we really believe that the prophets were right and that real peace is coming, then we can't help begin doing it *now*. No point to wait for someone else to start it; start now and live like God's kingdom of peace is already here, showing the world what it can look like.



Christian peace activist Shane Claiborne is one of those people. Five years ago he got some welder- and blacksmith friends together to start turn weapons into farm tools. They took two AK-47 semi-automatic assault guns, and turned them into a rakes and shovels. They beat spears into plows...

They posted a video and pictures of this highly symbolic act of hope on their website and Facebook page, and within days other people

all over the world picked up on it and also started to convert weapons.

It snowballed into a movement, a movement of hope (<http://rawtools.org/swords-to-plows/>). Handguns are turned into guitars, machineguns into violins. War metal turned into whimsical artwork.



As Shane Claiborne puts it, "We refuse to wait any longer for others to do what the prophets tell us. We pray for peace and will continue to pray for peace, but we've also realized that sometimes we think we're waiting on God to act, while God may actually be waiting... on us.

We cannot wait on politicians or kings or presidents; the new world the prophets spoke of begins with us, here. *We* are the ones that we have been waiting on."

So today's two scripture readings show us the two sides of Advent:

One, Advent as a preparation for our own self, our own soul, like a mother prepares herself for the arrival of her child.

And the other side, Advent as preparation for the world-changing power of God that starts with God's ordinary people on the ground and cannot be stopped.

These two sides go hand in hand, you can't have one without the other: the personal and the communal.

Remember that couple at the Home Depot, who were feeling frazzled before Advent had even begun (and thousands of people with them)? Perhaps it's because we are preparing for the wrong things, like Christmas gifts and ornaments and food. It's not that all of our Christmas traditions are wrong or unimportant, it's just that if they become what Advent is about, they will take over and make us forget what we heard today: to wait, and to prepare ourselves for God's promises of a world made new and a creation transformed - and us saying YES to god's and Christ's open invitation to make it happen.

But all too often we forget, don't we? And so we wear ourselves out and get tired and irritated, and we compensate for it by buying more than we should, and eating and drinking more than we should, racking up a big credit card debt - and we hate it, and yet somehow we're doing it all over again the next year.

That's *not* what Isaiah and Matthew are talking about. They call us to re-imagine the way we've been doing things. To break the vicious circle, and to make room to notice where God's reality is already breaking through into ours. Places where tools of destruction are made into tools of life, where people live out God's vision of hope and abundance for all. Not presidents or kings, but ordinary people on the ground, people like Shane Claiborne, and people like us. People who take the time to grow a row of extra vegetables for others, or who make the Café del Soul happen or the Mitten Tree. Ordinary people who won't be happy until nations stop fighting other nations, who won't be happy until we stop training for warfare.

Noah entered his boat. People didn't realize what was going to happen until the flood came and swept them all away. That is the way it will be when the Son of Man comes.

"Two men will be working together in the field; one will be taken, the other left. Two women will be grinding flour at the mill; one will be taken, the other left.

"So you, too, must keep watch! For you don't know what day your Lord is coming. Understand this: If a homeowner knew exactly when a burglar was coming, he would keep watch and not permit his house to be broken into. You also must be ready all the time, for the Son of Man will come when least expected.