

Glen Ridge Congregational Church, November 28, 2010
 Advent 1 – Year A
 Isaiah 2:1-5

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Happy advent to you! Happy new year! The first Sunday of the liturgical year – the beginning of advent, that season when we prepare for the coming of Christ, a season when we hear yet again the church’s emphasis on hope and the future. Part of what we do this season is to prepare for the coming of Christ as a baby in Bethlehem – but that’s not where we start this Sunday. We don’t start at the beginning of the story – instead we start at the end.

Now – we know about this. We are people used to setting goals. We nod in agreement with the saying “The one who wants to make a good beginning must keep the finish line in view.” It makes sense to us, doesn’t it. Athletes visualize themselves breaking the tape at the finish line – or scoring the goal – or blocking the shot. Investment advisors ask us to envision what we’d like to be doing in our retirement so we can plan accordingly. Career counselors ask us to think about what we’d like to be doing in 5 years and what the steps might be to get there. Nobody tells us to wander off aimlessly and see what happens. Keep your options open, sure, but make sure you have a goal and set off toward it.

Isaiah paints us a beautiful picture of a destination: someday, someday, he tells us, this is the future that lies ahead of us. God’s future for us – people from all over the world gathered together, all worshipping the one God, no more war between nations; swords beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. A beautiful vision of the future – a future to hope for.

Advent is the season of hope – a season to remind us that we worship God of things that are not yet, the God of things that will be. Advent is the season to hold up before ourselves visions of things that seem so remote to us – images of weapons of war turned into tools for producing food, the lion lying down with the lamb, light that darkness will never quench, a child born of a virgin, whose name shall be called wonderful, counselor, the everlasting Father, the prince of peace. What a wonderful dream this is!

Walter Brueggemann compares this beautiful passage from Isaiah to the “I have a dream” speech of Dr. Martin Luther King – when I let myself, I feel the awesome challenge of both of these writings – there’s a joy that wells up in me as I consider the hope of what might be. But most days our reality is a long way from either prophet’s vision of peace, justice, healing. This year like every year, we read the Isaiah text in the context of war – conflicts and struggles flare up and threaten to flare up all over the world – in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Darfur, Korea – in our cities and neighborhoods, our homes and workplaces, our relationships with one another, maybe even right here within the walls of our congregation.

We’ve come to understand the absence of peace in other ways – in the threat of terrorism that makes even peaceful days feel ominous – secure places unsafe; in the

damage to the earth that we will leave as a tragic legacy to our grandchildren and to theirs as well.

Maybe we're not very different from the people of Israel at the time of Isaiah's writings – it isn't too hard to imagine how those people must have felt over the centuries in the face of threat, destruction, exile by one empire after another. It was over 500 years before the time of Jesus when they listened to this dream – the vision of the future. Then they'd look at their beautiful city of Jerusalem – burned and battered by powers that must have seemed to them unstoppable. But they knew there was one power stronger than any empire and any destructive force – and this passage from the prophet Isaiah gives them hope – a vision of God's promise of a future very different from what they saw. These words are so graceful, so haunting, so expressive of our deepest yearnings too – that we use them in our public life as a vision for all God's children. James Limburg tells us that these words are engraved on a wall near the headquarters of the United Nations in New York – where they inspire the work of many nations, many different peoples, all who yearn to live together in justice and peace. What a beautiful and grace filled image to hold in our hearts during these cold and difficult days.

And we hear these words not only in a time of conflict and war and worry but in a new season – the beginning of the new church year. Advent is the time of waiting – and so much more. Again, Walter Brueggemann says, “Advent is an abrupt disruption in our ordinary time – an utterly new year, new time, new life. Everything begins again.” Isn't that wonderful thought! A time for dreaming about what seems impossible! Let that promise, that hope, seep into you! Don't we need, yearn, to hear that.

Put that against the Black Friday mentality – we read about hopes for increased consumer spending, waiting for annual figures about how much better this Christmas season is than last year – the craziness – that's my word – of spending, doing, more and more – what a great invitation Isaiah gives us. There is something different! There is hope! And here we are as the church, stepping into a new time – beginning a season of hoping and waiting for something much more important than profits or spending. Brueggemann again: “Advent invites us to awaken from our numbed endurance and our domesticated expectations, to consider our life afresh in light of new gifts that God is about to give.” (Texts For Preaching, Year A).

In this new season and new year, we dare to hope for something much better than the news may report. We begin a new time remembering who is really in charge of everything, and setting our hearts on being part of this One's plan. As beautiful as these verses are, they paint a very clear picture: God is the one who is in charge; God is the One who brings this dream to reality, but there's work for us to do too – in reshaping the instruments of war, violence, and destruction into instruments of peace and provision for all.

So, there are words of comfort and promise about what God is going to do – aren't there – but between the lines there's a call for us as well to participate in bringing this dream to reality. Somehow we know that Dr. King expected us not to just sit around waiting for that great day of peace and justice – but he expected us to work as we wait. And Isaiah too wants us to loosen the grip on our swords and instruments of war and to take up the things of peace, to “walk in the light of the Lord.”

This all sounds really, really nice, doesn't it – but Brueggemann says there is, of course, a catch. “God wills for the world a center of justice and righteousness that will

get our minds off our petty agenda and our penchant to protect our little investments.” Brueggemann says he finds that vision overwhelming – and not very welcome, because the things I value most I am reluctant to lose or risk and even more reluctant to share.” (Peace).

And I know if we’re honest, we feel the same way – the things of war between nations are also the same things that we struggle with as individuals in our own personal lives.

We might believe that the nations just can’t beat their swords and spears into the things of peace right now as much as they might want to – there are still so many situations in which those weapons are needed. After all, that’s how we keep a kind of peace – isn’t it – that’s the world view - at least until a better one is possible. But Isaiah promises a day when, in Brueggemann’s words, “the nations will not only delight in God’s person, they will be engaged in God’s purpose.” (Texts for Preaching, Year A)

Isaiah promised the people of Israel, promises us, a day when God’s ways will fully shape how we live, not just some of us, but every single person – “all the nations – many peoples” streaming toward the bright light of peace, and enough for all. It may not look like that right now, but Advent is about taking the long view of things. Looking forward in hope. Looking forward in anticipation. Looking forward to a time of peace we can’t even imagine today. And, in the meantime, James Limburg reminds us, “We’re invited to get this marvelous picture of peacemaking out of the realm of the imagination and into the realities of everyday life.” (The Lectionary Commentary)

Don’t we doubt that seeking peace through justice will ever turn back the dogs of war – but as Mary Hinkle Shore claims, “even skeptics have to admit that justice, safety, and widespread prosperity have a better chance of resulting in peace than injustice, danger, and disparity of wealth.” (New Proclamation 2007-8).

In a November 1, 2010 column of the New York Times, Bob Herbert writes movingly and disturbingly – of the dramatically growing disparity of wealth in the United States in the past few years, even during this economic crisis. Every soup kitchen, every pantry, reports a significant rise in the number of people seeking their services this year. Close to home, we see it at Bethel Love where more families and singles are coming for help – and most of these people are not homeless – they are the working poor who are finding it impossible to put food on the table and pay their heating bills, pay their rent. And last week when we put up the Star Tree, the confirmands spoke of the simplicity of the gift requests – one of them said, they want coats, boots, warm pajamas, warm socks – there aren’t many toy requests here. And they were struck by the number of gift cards to grocery stores – Shop Rite – it was hard for them to imagine needing help buying food – many of the confirmands were quietly thoughtful as they placed the stars on the tree – I was moved by their response.

And I thank God for the service the kitchens and pantries provide – and for the willingness of this congregation to be part of God’s work in our own area who step forward to share, to help our brothers and sisters meet the daily demands of existence.

Maybe we should read these modern day writings along side the ancient ones in order to hear the challenge of the prophet and the call of God to respond.

If this text weren’t so comforting and full of hope, it would be painful to read – just like many of our news articles are today. How our hearts long for a time – the time – of peace and plenty in the world! Maybe the most powerful affirmation though, is that

history belongs to God and will unfold as God sees fit. No matter what, God is working to bring about that great day.

The question is, then, what is your role, our church's role, the wider church's role in bringing about the great day described by Isaiah? How does the ministry of our church, and the spiritual lives and practices of our members and friends point to, anticipate, and participate in the in breaking of this day, this dream of God? What's our part in it?

As we immerse ourselves in Advent observance, Christmas preparations, let's stop – take a breath – and look forward as much as backward in time for inspiration and hope – let's ponder this question: what do we truly long for in our lives? What price are we willing to pay for it? Have we built our lives around protecting what we have – as individuals, communities, nations, as church? And haven't we beaten our pruning hooks into spears in order to protect that we claim as our own? As we write our Christmas Cards, with their lovely sentiments of grace and good wishes, in what ways are we pursuing peace in our lives and in the world around us?

How can we as people of faith transcend our differences and speak with one voice about the call to peace given by a God who – today as always – loves each one of us? What is that we have in common – our care for our children, for the earth, for the future – what is it we have in common that brings us together in recognition that we and our lives, belong to the same God – how will we find our common ground in peace, not war? What ways do we need to imagine for our interactions to change? How might we deepen our respect for one another? How might we hear one another better? And in the hearing, listen for the voice of the still speaking God – the same yesterday, today, and in the future.

Happy advent. Happy new year! May our advent observances usher in a new peace, a new joy, a new relationship with God and each other. Amen.

*This sermon has been heavily inspired by Kate Huey's reflections in Sermon Seeds, available on the United Church of Christ website. I am grateful for her insights.