

In the Meantime

November 28, 2010 Advent 1C

Scriptures: Isaiah 2:1-5

2:1 The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

2:2 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.

2:3 Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

2:4 He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

2:5 O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!

Matthew 24:36-44

24:36 "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

24:37 For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.

24:38 For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark,

24:39 and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man.

24:40 Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left.

24:41 Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left.

24:42 Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.

24:43 But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into.

24:44 Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

Proclamation of the WORD

Off the coast of Charleston is little island called Dewees. There are no roads or cars. You have to take a ferry to travel to and from the Isle of Palms there. Once there, only bicycles and golf carts operate along the paths. My friend Julie and I went to her uncle's home there on Spring Break from Seminary. I was about six months pregnant at the time. We boarded the ferry with all our provisions and belongings. The day was clear and beautiful. The water was calm, and the ride was very pleasant to the edge of the island.

A few days later we boarded the ferry once again to return home. The weather had changed and so had the water. The water had been slick and smooth. It had turned choppy and dicey. The sky was cloudy and foreboding. We clambered aboard trusting the wits of our ferry operator. I was well-past

that morning sickness phase of my pregnancy, but this trip was a real challenge. We puttered along-up and down, up and down. I kept my face down and eyes closed, trying to breathe deeply and just deal with the motion sickness. I am sure I was green as a lizard. Julie suggested that I look up and out. I tried it. I trained my eye on the tallest building on the coast ahead of me. It worked! As long as I looked ahead, eyes fixed on the highest point, my stomach was calmed. I looked forward to solid ground and could not wait to get through this. In the meantime, I focused ahead to that tall yellow beach house!

The prophet Isaiah was living in white capped waters of change and threat. Israel was pushing the Southern kingdom of Judah to join with them in an alliance against the Assyrian Empire. Then the Assyrians laid siege to Jerusalem. They were hemmed in by Egypt on the other side. Fear was running rampant. The people were seized up, head down, eyes closed, praying for an end. They could not see clearly through the haze of their situation.

People were hunkered down and doing what scared people do. They had been operating on a, "I got mine. You get your own." mentality. They had forgotten the most vulnerable among them and grown tight-fisted and afraid. They had neglected the widow, the orphan, the poor. They had grown apathetic. They just didn't care. "That's just the way it is, nothing I can do about it." They had lost faith. They had lost hope. They were caught up in war and grown self-focused. They were consumed with building weapons. They were not looking to God. At his wits end, the king Ahaz turns to the prophet Isaiah for a word.

In the midst of choppy waters, the prophet is saying, "Train your eye to the mountain top- to the highest point." Don't look down, look up. Focus your eyes ahead. Then he casts a vision,

"And people of all races will come and say:

'Let us make our way together to the mountain of the Lord, that he may teach us his ways, And that we may walk in his paths. 'He shall judge between the nations and shall decide for many peoples; And they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks...Nation shall not lift up sword against nation. Neither shall they learn war any more.'

Sure preacher, that sounds nice, you may say, but Isaiah is just a dreamer, an idealist. He isn't living in the real world. But I think Isaiah is the one who is the biggest realist. Chapter 1 describes the reality of the situation, one that does not look that unlike our own. Isaiah is the truth-teller, the practical one, the realist. He also announces the promise of a faithful God to his people and calls the people to faithfulness. Only 10 percent of Isaiah's writing are these passages of promise and salvation, the rest describes the reality of the world and God's judgment. But he keeps God's vision before us and we read these words typically during Advent when we are hoping for a new life, longing for a world made new- looking to Jesus who has already revealed God to us and who will come again.

The world has always depended on a faithful remnant of people to cast their eyes ahead, to keep focused. These witnesses will help lead us all. As my friend Steve Montgomery, pastor of Idlewild in Memphis, writes,

“The future of our planet has always depended upon people... fixing their hearts, minds and souls on an alternative vision...on a landmark established by God. And without that vision, the prophet says, the people perish.

But there is something else that separated Isaiah from all the others. He wasn't simply pointing to the future. Rather, he was speaking about the present moment!

Did you notice how he began this prophecy? "In days to come," reads the NRSV translation. "In days to come..." But the literal Hebrew is a bit more nuanced. "In the back of the days," or better yet, "In the midst of the present." Isaiah is suggesting that the *present* moment is ripe, or to use an appropriate Advent term, *pregnant* with God's presence."¹

I remember being pregnant. What is hidden to the human eye and to the world is very real to the one who is pregnant. In the hidden mystery there is new life brewing. The first kick or squirm of the baby is so small, that you question, was that really the little one? Knowing the new life is growing inside colors the whole world around you. You pray harder that this child might never have to fight terrorists or be harmed. You pray and work harder for the world to be a place of kindness, goodness, and peace when you are about to bring a child into the world. I remember taking communion and realizing that our baby was taking communion at the same time, one with Christ. Talk about holy moments. Or I remember graduating Seminary in my cap and gown, 8 months pregnant with Avery. This baby graduated from Seminary with me. With me just as God is with me, God is with us, Immanuel. These are pregnant times full of hope because God is with us. This is what we proclaim this Advent Season.

People of Vision

We are people who live by a vision, a vision of what God is at work in the world to do. It is what Jesus meant by the reign of God or the Kingdom of God- already at work among us but will be seen in its fullness. We are to be people who, in the meantime, keep our eyes trained on the highest point even when the mountain of God appears far away in the horizon.

We keep the reign of God in sight. We see it in Jesus who converted fear into love, brokenness into wholeness, enemies to friends. He died surrounded by swords; a spear stabbed his side; nails tore his flesh- the ultimate act of human violence. Those implements of war entered into the person of Jesus who was infinite love himself and were smelted into redemption bringing us the light of the world in our times of darkness.

We are people of vision. We live knowing God's future is already coming toward us in a Second Advent, a Second Coming. We are living in the meantime, living into that vision.

The gospel of Matthew reminds disciples that we cannot know the time of Jesus' coming, but that we should be ready and prepared in the meantime, in the present.

We live as people who know the light of Christ has been born into the world and will lead us into a future of justice and peace.

We live as people who believe that God calls all nations unto God's self- into a common life of hope. And we know our well-being is tied up in the well-being of our brother, sister, and neighbors.

We live as people who work diligently to help turn swords and instruments of war into implements of cultivating the earth and feeding hungers.

We believe and work for the present Kingdom of God in the meantime.

There is a Jesuit chapel at St. Louis University. It is a place of prayer. Followers of Christ have creatively lit the chapel. The light fixtures are empty twentieth-century cannon shells. The light of those transformed shells leads the people in prayer as they follow the light of the world, Jesus Christ. They live as people making ready for the future God has set before us. They know the God who can transform the nations when they turn again to God and live faithfully. They give witness to God's hopeful future.

"Come let us walk in the light of the Lord," the prophet Isaiah call to us. We must keep our eyes trained to the mountain ahead trusting that it will lead us in the light of Christ and the paths of peace. By this we will be ready!

Prayer: Peace-making God, you call us forward into the Advent as your waiting people. Even as we wait, we work for a world made right as you intend it. And we are so glad that we do not walk alone, but that you, O God, in Jesus Christ is present with us. We hope for that great day, even as we wait and work, in the meantime, for you to usher in your Kingdom. Amen.

Laura Smith Conrad
Fort Hill Presbyterian Church

¹ Stephen Montgomery, *Closer than You Think*, on day1.org. Steve was my supervising pastor at St. Andrews Presbyterian Church while I was in Seminary. He also baptized Avery, the baby I mention. I am grateful for his insight and influence on my life. His ideas shaped this sermon as well.