

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Nov 27th 2016

In Isaiah's time, wars were a constant part of life. Political intrigues and alliances divided nations and tribes. Misery seemed to be everywhere and people and nations were alienated from each other as never before. It is disheartening that so little seems to have changed since Isaiah spoke to Israel nearly three thousand years ago.

What a perfect time to begin Advent.

Isaiah's message, written in the midst of discouragement and chaos is always about calling us back to rely on God, and not our own self-reliance for salvation. Even when things appear desolate, he tells us to be filled with hope: our faithful God is here with us. During Advent, we will hear the prophet's message over and over because Isaiah is used for most of the first readings of the season.

Today, the First Sunday of Advent begins with two messages: Have hope and Prepare for God.

The first reading, which is the focus of the first part of Advent, is about a future time of unity and peace. It feels like the right message for us today. No matter what country we live in, there are divisions and a deep need for healing and reconciliation. Sometimes we can't imagine that there is any reason to have hope.

Isaiah reminds us that our God is faithful to us always and who knows about the situation we are in. Our God is always moving to bring us together. What is the coming together? What might we all "stream toward" together? Isaiah says, "that he may instruct us in his ways, and we may walk in his paths." Our only real hope of coming together is to come together in greater fidelity to our God. The closer we come to our God, the closer we will come toward each other. It will no longer be about a winning and losing – about victory over the other, by destroying the other. When this hope-filled unity comes, Isaiah says,

"They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; one nation shall not raise the sword against another, nor shall they train for war again."

Each of us can find a desire in our hearts that sings, "Let us go rejoicing" to this kind of communion and peace. As Paul says, it is a time for us to "wake from sleep." This is a season to "throw off" many things that are all about darkness and to "put on the armor of light," to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ."

In the Gospel, Jesus offers us the central Advent theme. Because we are letting ourselves wake up and become hopeful about God's gathering us together in community, we prepare. We have to let ourselves enter a season of getting ready.

We might have been so stuck in discouragement that we are no longer attentive to signs of hope, to graces being offered us, to any light at all. Could this Advent season be one in which I give myself to more opportunities for togetherness, for bridge building? Sometimes genuine healing and reconciliation in our families, our communities and in our world need serious preparation. We prepare by letting light into places of darkness.

Concretely, can this Advent be about continuing gestures of love for a spouse who often bugs me?

Can this be a time to reach out to the adult child who has disappointed me – who I might have hurt by my judgements? What nice, caring, generous things can I do that builds a bridge, without recalling a hurt or continuing my finger pointing? Is there a friend or neighbor or church community member I have recently fought with about our differing opinions about something? Could a coffee or tea together be a time to let Advent come alive by spending time saying that our relationship is more important than our differing ideas?

Advent is not about our “getting ready” to let God come to us – this season is not about saving ourselves, but recognizing God is already with us and in us. All we have to do is feel God’s presence in our hearts. This wonderful season is about recognizing our own weakness yet feeling how deeply God cares for us, even in our deepest failings. We don’t love that freely or with such depth, so we may not believe it, yet from Isaiah’s time we have been encouraged to “walk in the light of the Lord!”

As we find these ways of preparing, we can pray, with growing desire, “Come, Lord Jesus. We await your coming. Come O Lord.”

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