

Sermon – November 27, 2022

Pastor Dan Hollis

Isaiah 2:1-5

Today we begin the season of Advent: the four-week period of waiting for the celebration of Christmas. In Advent we try to put ourselves in the shoes of people who lived *before* the *birth* of Jesus. When Advent works, it's when our experience of *Christmas* at the *end* of Advent is as joyous as if Jesus had never been born before, and *this* Christmas, when we celebrate the birth of Jesus, we feel in our hearts that we're finally celebrating the *first* day of a new, bright era of hope, peace, joy, and love. This Advent season I encourage you to try to bring yourself to that place—that place of waiting, of seeking, of *needing* Christ's presence in this world—so that when Christmas comes, it is to *you* like... God exploding onto the scene for the *first* time, ready to roll up some sleeves and get Good done.

“And so this is Christmas, I hope you have fun: the near and the dear ones, the old and the young. A very merry Christmas, and a happy New Year; let's hope it's a good one without any fear. And so this is Christmas; for weak and for strong, for rich and the poor ones, the war is so long... And so this is Christmas, and what have we done. Another year over, and a new one just begun.”

Those are of course not the words of the *Gospel* of John, but of John *Lennon* and Yoko Ono, in their song “Happy Christmas.”

And just as Lennon and Ono's words were written in a time of war—for them the Vietnam War—as they looked forward with *hope* toward a new, better year to come, so too were the words of our reading today from the prophet Isaiah.

Isaiah's message for us today is a message of hope: a hope for a better world in days to come—a world we should all yearn for and strive for—a world of justice, righteousness, wisdom freely accessible... and *people* who choose prosperity over war, and the light of love over the void of hate. That's a message Jesus himself would one day be born to echo, and it's a world he came to herald... to point us to and spur us toward. The vision of Isaiah is the goal of our faith, and it's the hope of a people surrounded by darkness.

Isaiah of Jerusalem was a prophet in the courts of kings, seven hundred years before the birth of Christ. He lived surrounded by... people who were insulated from the violence and tribulations of all those beyond the walls of the city. Isaiah walked among those would never meet the people who lived on the fringes, the ones who suffered the consequences of their rulers' decisions.

It was Isaiah's job to wake up the people of Jerusalem to their sins and shortcomings, and to get them moving together in the direction God needed them to go.

Isaiah lived in a time where the Assyrian empire had conquered the northern kingdom of Israel, and it was only a matter of time before Judah—the region that contained the holy city of Jerusalem—would likely fall to Assyria as well. Isaiah preached in the court of the king of Judah as all around them the world was falling apart. To put you in their shoes, it would be like if today, Isaiah lived and preached in Washington, DC while the armies of... Canada conquered everything west of the Mississippi.

In the meantime, the people of Judah were facing a spiritual crisis, as greed, selfishness, and hypocrisy were fast eclipsing the virtues of righteousness that Judah had been founded on.

The words of Jesuit professor Frederick Moriarty really hit home with me:

“With Assyria sweeping all before her, many of the Judeans began to doubt the power of [the Lord] to preserve the dynasty of David in accordance with his promises. Others took an opposite but equally unspiritual position.

“Interpreting the covenant with David as a guarantee of absolute invincibility no matter what crimes were committed against [the Lord], they tried to force the nation into revolts that were nothing short of suicidal. When religion becomes a blank check for national wrongdoing, the end is not far off; no one saw this better than Isaiah.”

A chilling reproach from a prophet who could be speaking to *us* from across more than two and a half thousand years.

Now, while the kingdoms of Judah and Israel *were* victims of Assyrian aggression and expansion, *Isaiah* saw the armies of Assyria as the obvious consequence of a people who had strayed so far from righteousness. ‘Of *course* God will let your nation fall,’ Isaiah thought. ‘Don’t you deserve it?’ It could be at the hands of Assyrians or plague rats or a great volcano, but it was like Isaiah was saying ‘you should have seen this coming.’ He sure did.

What are our Assyrians today? Nuclear weapons and nations with the willingness to use them? Rising sea levels? World hunger, inflation, terrorism? The widening gap between rich and poor? A scarcity of natural resources? What is it when *you* look out *there* that leaves *you* without hope? That’s *our* Assyria.

But the amazing thing about Isaiah wasn’t just that he could *see* the doom that others had blinded themselves to. The amazing thing about Isaiah was that he saw all that... and he didn’t feel hopeless. Whatever happened with the Assyrians, Isaiah never believed that every last Judean would fall and the people of God will be no more. He

believed in a future—he *saw* a future—where this could all and would all be turned around.

Who here can start to feel hopeless when you watch the news, or go online, or talk to people out in the world? Raise your hand if the things you see and hear out there sometimes leave you without hope. I know it happens to me.

But Isaiah of Jerusalem, the prophet of the Lord, who was surrounded by hopelessness to spare, made a promise about the days to come. It was the same promise that Jesus of Nazareth, the son of God, would be born into this world to make. Isaiah didn't know or say *when* this promise would come to pass, and *Jesus'* timetable was cryptic at best, but they both promised us that in days to come we would be raised up out of the hopelessness that surrounds us. That the people will come together in the light of day, seeking wisdom and goodness, and sharing it with all the world. That nations will no longer clash like Assyria of old, and that the only violence... will be that of warriors beating the metal of their own swords into plowshares.

One of my favorite lines from a hymn tells *us*—the Community of Christ—to “disarm the powers that war and all that can destroy, turn bombs to bread and tears of anguish into joy.” Isaiah said that in the *just* world that God seeks, the peoples of the world “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.”

We may not use swords and spears so much these days, but the world Isaiah is pointing us toward is a world where people... exchange their machine guns for *hunting* rifles, their missiles and bombs for shovels and fishing rods... where we exchange our tanks for tractors and the whips of oppression for the bonds of friendship.

*That's* a world worth hoping for! That's the world *Christ* was hoping for.

Advent is supposed to be a dark time. The nights have grown longer, and we're farther from the joy and celebration of *last* Christmas than we've ever been. But four weeks from now, we will celebrate Christ being born into this world. A beacon of light, in the darkness of Advent, that heralds the dawning of a new age: an age that Isaiah promised *his* people in the darkness of *their* despair.

Because guess what? Assyria never conquered Judah. It failed. It had no *right* to fail; Jerusalem was *going* to fall, just like Israel and every other nation before it. But Isaiah was right. The people listened, and his infectious hope for their deliverance brought a renewed spirit into Judah, a spirit which saw them take the steps needed to bring them closer to God's desire for them. Isaiah's promise—God's promise—of a mountain raised above hills, and a time of war turning to a time of prosperity... that came true!

And seven hundred years later, when once more a people were yearning for deliverance, in the darkness of their *own* Advent, in the depths of their own hopelessness... a child was born in Bethlehem of Judea, to lead us *all* to a world that would echo the *hope* of Isaiah, and stand forevermore.

We're not there yet. We may even be farther from it than we ever were. But that's how Judah felt. And still there was hope.

I hope you can allow this Advent season to be a place of stillness and contemplation for you. But may the darkness of Advent not leave you hope-less, but hope-full. May the birth of Jesus, the celebration of Christmas, be the spark you need—that *we* need—to truly begin the work of lifting this mountain we all share to the heights God *knows* we can reach.

May it be *this* Christmas, and the *birth* of the One it represents, that finally inspires us to bring to pass the world the prophets have hoped for. May we see in days to come—may we see in *our* time... a world of *justice*. A world of *goodness*. A world of *wisdom*. A world *without* war. Without poverty, without school shootings, without pollution and rising sea levels, without invasions and insurrections and racial injustice. A world without hate crimes and propaganda and exploitation. A world where righteousness rains *down*, and God's blessings are never *snatched* up.

Let us walk in that light, for it is the light of the Lord.

In the final chorus of Happy Christmas... "And so this is Christmas, and what have we done? Another year over, and a new one just begun," there's another chorus happening in the background. A harmony: "War is over, if you want it; war is over, now." May it be so, and may it start *this* Christmas.

Amen.