

1st Sunday of Advent (Year A)

Isaiah 2:1-5

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

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.*

*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.*

*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.*

*O house of Jacob,
come, let us walk
in the light of the Lord!*

Psalm 122

*I was glad when they said to me,
'Let us go to the house of the Lord!'*

*Our feet are standing
within your gates, O Jerusalem.*

*Jerusalem—built as a city
that is bound firmly together.*

*To it the tribes go up,
the tribes of the Lord,
as was decreed for Israel,
to give thanks to the name of the Lord.*

For there the thrones for judgement were set up,

the thrones of the house of David.

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:

'May they prosper who love you.

Peace be within your walls,

and security within your towers.'

For the sake of my relatives and friends

I will say, 'Peace be within you.'

For the sake of the house of the Lord our God,

I will seek your good.

What can't wait? That question will guide us as we depart for this divine journey known as Advent. Advent comes from the Latin word meaning "coming" and is the same root of the word "adventure." So, together, let's take an adventure shall we? An adventure to welcome the coming of the Christ-child.

But we do not take this journey together in a vacuum; we take this journey in the midst of the craziness of our lives. Advent comes to us relentlessly, year after year, during a month that for many of us is the busiest of the twelve. For some of us, we struggle to maintain our sanity driving the children from one event to another. For others of us, we are stressing out over finals as the semester draws to a close. Others still are trying to get their ducks in a row as families comes together to sleep under one roof. Still others are struggling with finding joy while navigating the holidays for the first time without loved ones who have recently died.

No matter what category, or categories, you find yourself in, I ask you the following questions: what can't wait? What *can* wait?

Our lives have many things that compete for our attention. And sometimes, we get so caught up in the frantic routine that we forget to stop, breathe, and prioritize. Advent offers us the opportunity to break that routine and to step back to assess what can't wait. Whether we realize it or not, we make decisions all the time as to what *can* wait. Trying to get the children ready in the morning, we decide that the dishes can wait until we get home from work. Trying to balance everything in our lives, we decide that that long-awaited vacation can wait one more year. Trying to avoid the pain or the awkwardness, we decide that reconnecting with that estranged family member can wait until we find the courage. We make at least a hundred decisions every day to decide what *can* wait. Now, it's time to talk about what *can't* wait.

No, this sermon series is not about giving us a guilt trip for procrastination. This sermon series is not about shaming us into getting off our butts to do those things that we've been dusting under the rug for far too long. This sermon series is about "practicing the pause" to take stock of what is really important. Think of it as cleaning out that garage that has gotten WAY out of hand over the past few years (or decades). Sure, it's a pain in the butt to do it and no one really looks forward to it, but you have to admit it feels amazing when you finally get it done!

So, let's get to the work of waiting. Not a passive waiting but an active and prayerful waiting. As we wait for Jesus Christ, we are not left without a guide. Scripture will lead us as we discern what can't wait.

Our first stop is is the prophetic poetry of Isaiah. As we mentioned a few weeks ago as we journeyed through Isaiah 35, it is the work of the prophet to invite us to practice our "prophetic imagination" in order to

dream into existence a world of perfect peace. Isaiah speaks to us poetry that dares to dream of a day in which all our weapons are beaten by the blacksmith into gardening tools. The poetry provides us with an image of peace that many of us might consider downright scandalous. But the poetry of Isaiah insists that peace can't wait. The peace of our children, the peace of our schools, the peace of our workplaces and our places of worship cannot wait. And in order for that to happen, we have to be impatient. We have to say that the safety of the vulnerable around us can't wait. It can't wait one more election cycle. It can't wait one more news cycle. It can't wait one more second because God's children are suffering and the poetry of Isaiah is nothing short of a provocative peace.

But notice that this passage isn't just about destroying weapons. It's also about building plows. As Walter Brueggemann puts it: *"It is not enough to end spears and swords as an act of romance or goodwill. There must at the same time be production of instruments of life, such as plowshares. The economy is transformed; the earth is also transformed, from battleground to fertile ground."* A plow is about one thing: disturbance; it disturbs the earth. If the earth is left unplowed, the nutrients of the soil beneath the top crust remain buried and unless. But, if one introduces an element of disturbance, say, a plow, then fruitfulness can come to fruition. The plow is nothing more than a blade. Not a blade that pierces flesh but that pierces the earth in order to disturb it and to bring to the surface the nutrients buried deep within the soil.

So, if we are to be serious about destroying our weapons, we must be equally serious about asking ourselves this question: what around us needs to be disturbed? What can't wait to be overturned and torn apart in order that new seeds of peace can be planted and grown into the fruits of God's promised day?

What if the work of the Church is that of a plow? What disciples of Christ are called to disturb the ground that has proven unfruitful because it has sat still for too long? What if Christ's Church is called to plow through the stubborn, dry, parched land of apathy, violence, and complicity?

Advent is a time when we are reminded of a story in which Jesus Christ came to us not as a weapon of war but as a plow. A plow's purpose is to upset the status quo and break up things that need to be broken up. When God could have chosen to leave God's creation parched and unfruitful, God instead chose to send us Jesus Christ to stir things up and bring the deep-seeded fruitfulness of God's purpose to the surface of our lives.

And it is that plowing that gives us hope. It gives us hope because God loves us too much to leave us to our own devices. God's love for us simply could not wait. God sends us Jesus Christ in order to plow through our hardened hearts and bring to the surface the love that God plants within us. And God knows we need this now more than ever. As your pastor, I recognize that hope can be a difficult thing to cling to in times like these.

So, on the day that we light the candle for hope and remind ourselves that God's promised day of peace can't wait, we are also gifted with the words of Psalm 122. This is a song of peace for Jerusalem that we think was sung by pilgrims making their journey to the temple.

The temple was a very symbolic place. Ronald Allen has said the following about the Temple's significance: *"The second issue is the larger symbolic role of the temple. It was not only a utilitarian house of worship but represented God's purposes for Israel. When people entered the temple, they were symbolically to experience life as God intended. When they left the temple, they were empowered to enact the fullness of that life in everyday circumstances. The quality of life symbolized in the temple was to permeate the rest of Jewish existence, beginning with Jerusalem."*

Therefore, if we are to proclaim the words of Psalm 122 and Isaiah 2 and call for the peace of Jerusalem, or Lexington, or Beaumont, we must understand that when we come to this “temple,” we enact within these four walls a dream of a peaceful world even though we are acutely aware that we are far from its fruition. We come here to dream the dream of beating swords into plowshares not despite of but *because of* the violence we see in the world around us. We come here to insist that God’s promised day of peace can’t wait not despite of but *because of* the brokenness we see in the world. We are called to this sanctuary as a dress rehearsal for the work that we are called to do “out there.” We come to this place to dream about God’s promised day and then we exit through those doors to share that hope with others as disciples of Emmanuel.

And that hope is not a wishy washy thing. That hope is as real as the heat coming off of that purple candle. That hope is as real as the bread and juice that you’re about to taste. That hope is as real as a newborn in your arms. That hope is as real as the love that you all find here within these walls.

And so, for the sake of our family and for the sake of our friends and for the sake of our community, we will say “peace be with you.”

For the sake of our friends, family, and community, we will beat swords into plowshares and then use those plows to disturb the systems of injustice and violence around us.

For the sake of our friends, family, and community, we will seek God’s good and declare together that hope can’t wait. Peace can’t wait. God’s promised day can’t wait. And we can’t wait to welcome Jesus Christ in our arms into to stir us to be dreamers of God’s promised day.