

“Anticipation”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, GA
Season of Advent, HOPE Sunday, December 1, 2019
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Holy Scriptures: Isaiah 2: 1-5 Matthew 24: 34-44

Isaiah 2:1-5 (NRSV)

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

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. 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 anymore. ⁵ O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!

Matthew 24:34-44 (NRSV)

³⁴ Truly, I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³⁵ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³⁶ “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son,^[a] but only the Father. ³⁷ For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 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, 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. ⁴⁰ Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken, and one will be left. ⁴² Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day^[b] your Lord is coming. 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. ⁴⁴ Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

Footnotes:

- a. Matthew 24:36 Other ancient authorities lack *nor the Son*
- b. Matthew 24:42 Other ancient authorities read *at what hour*

Anticipation

Recently a location scout for a major motion picture asked if we would host a film crew, whether they could park their camera and lighting equipment trucks

on our parking lot,
and if our fellowship hall was available for catered meals for the cast and crew?
He said that a movie scene
was going to be filmed at the Dancing Goats coffee shop across the street
and had observed the nearby convenience of our physical plant.
Well, we checked the church calendar,
ran the request past our church trustees and leadership team
and gave two thumbs up.
All went smoothly.
The check cleared.
Cast and crew were delighted by the commendations;
we were happy to host.
A lighting techie with tattoos and blond dreadlocks
politely requested quiet time for prayer with God in this sanctuary.
The day after they departed Decatur,
a Maid Service arrived to scour and scrub every room they used.
Nice touch.
Some months pass.
We receive word from Rev. Tammy Groves,
a former member and active Disciples pastor, serving God in California.
Tammy said she was in a movie theater,
saw First Christian Church of Decatur fill the screen,
and almost shouted aloud.

So, Betty and I watched the movie, which is called "**Love, Simon**".
Three-fourths of the way into the movie,
Simon is undergoing a low point in his life.
Simon is feuding with his friends;
trust has been broken;
he is lonely, upset, bereft.
His previous trips to the Dancing Goat coffee shop
had been happy gatherings with his best buddies.
Now, when he picks up some java to go, he gets only one cup,
not the usual 3 extra cups of coffee for his 3 friends.
As he pulls his car onto West Ponce De Leon Avenue,
the camera pans the church on the hill,
taking in the white steeple, manicured lawn,
red brick New England architecture,
the wings of the church spread wide like the arms of Christ.
My initial reaction to seeing this facility on the big screen:
"Oh, no! People see the Church of Jesus Christ when the film is at its saddest."
And then my Christian faith kicked in.
"Oh, yes! People see the Church of Jesus Christ when Simon is at his lowest."

Today is the first day of Advent.
Advent is about anticipation, preparation, confession, hope.

*In Advent we are reminded
that Child is born for we whose burdens are so great.
In Advent gather together
we whose tears know no end.
Now is the season for us to collect
whose loneliness is intensified,
whose sadness is tangible,
whose cause to celebrate seems distant and remote.
For it is for you above all others
who know the joy of Advent.
It is unto you that a Savior is born,
One who comes to lift the burdens from your shoulders,
to wipe away your tears,
to speak love into your soul:
You are not alone,
for He is born this day, this season, this life,
for you.*

[Paraphrased from "Not Celebrate?" by Ann Weems; Kneeling in Bethlehem]

For you, here we speak of hope.
Here we bear witness with hope.
Here we hold hope for one another,
for neighbors near or far, known or unknown, friend or foe.
Hope is expected, borne, carried, held here in the arms of the whole people of God.
The building, the physical plant, reflects our ethos, our shared hope and hospitality.
Even more so,
this community of faith reflects the hope of God
who comes when we need love the most.

Which is *Now*.

The more I reflect on it, the gladder I am
the shot of our church is seen

when the movie "Love, Simon" is at its saddest.

When folks are at the nadir of their lives, their relationships, their meaning,
may the whole world look to the Church of Jesus Christ.

The outstretched arms of Christ as seen in our architecture,
the steeple that points folks to the intangible power of God's light,
the doors that open outward to welcome home one and all,
the doors that open outward to show Christians the mission field,
the open hearts, hands, and hospitality,
all show the way of hope.

Yes, we know how to give the gift of a sweater, a book, a tie.
Even better, we know how to give the gift of hope.

Anticipation

There is both a great cloud of witnesses and living souls in our midst
who embody hope and point us to the fulfillment of the promises of God.

We turn the Holy Scriptures for guidance on hopefulness,
and along the way we discover the witness of the prophets.

The Holy Scriptures are theological documentation of God's loving activity.

The Holy Bible is replete with the stories and songs,
prayers and praises of people's faith experiences.

Hannah tells how she met God in the Temple...

Peter preaches about a God who forgives...

Bartimaeus says he was blind but now he sees...

The Gerasene Demoniac shares he was lost but now is found...

Lazarus rejoices he was once dead to the world, and now he lives in Christ...

Jeremiah became a witness for hope.

Isaiah stands foursquare in the midst of a broken and fragmented city.

From the very beginning of Isaiah's call to follow God,
he was commissioned to keep hope alive.

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. –Isaiah 2: 1-2*

This was no simple summons from the Lord to Isaiah to proclaim such a Word.

As Abraham Heschel pointed out,

"The call to be a prophet is more than an invitation.

It is first of all a feeling of being enticed, of acquiescence or willing surrender.

But this winsome feeling is only one aspect of the experience.

*The other aspect is a sense of being ravished or carried away by violence,
of yielding to an overpowering force against one's will.*

*The prophet feels both the attraction and the coercion of God,
the appeal and the pressure,*

the charm and the stress.

[The prophet] is conscious of both voluntary identification and forced capitulation." [1]

Isaiah preached hope in a time of despair and desperation.

At some point in their lives most prophets are shunned or silenced or stoned to death.

Isaiah's vocation as a prophet lasted some forty years.

He encouraged his people to work where they were planted,

and to remember from whence they came and would one day return.

So, he preached hope.

Even and especially in the midst of what seems like despair,

he trusted that God was nigh.

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

Anticipation

Isaiah proclaims God’s vision of a new world,
a wholesome world,
where the economy is not beholden to military spending,
one where battlegrounds become fertile gardens,
swords are beaten into plowshares,
the Temple shall be a centerpiece of God’s love in action.
Isaiah imagines a world made new with love,
seeing through the eyes of God a bright future,
one that we can start to build now, together.

So, anticipate, imagine, live into God’s bright future.
Live in God’s presence, in the present.
Be. Here. Now.
Keep hope alive.
Keep alive within you a vision for the future,
a confidence that the promise of God will be fulfilled.

We await, wide awake, faithful between the Already and the Not Yet.
So, we anticipate the coming of the Christ Child.
Hopefully.
Longingly.
Patiently.
And in the meantime, meanwhile, in the interim, in the interval,
for the moment, for the present, for the time being,
for now, we wait...in the Now.

Restoration happens now, in the now.
We are in the business of reclaiming our soul every day.
It is perfectly natural for our minds to get ahead of ourselves, or to dwell on the past.
How many of us are anxious for tomorrow because we wrestle with living today?
Please, resist allowing the future to overshadow the present or the process.

How many of us struggle to move into the brightness of today,
feeling challenged because of what we've done previously,
or had done to us, without our consent, against our will,
or maybe all of the above?

Please, resist allowing your past to overshadow the present or the process.

Anticipate hope made real, here, now.

They say that a mother was seated on a bench in our church's Decatur Toy Park
when a small boy about five years old sat down near her.

He stared at what appeared to be a prized possession: A Mickey Mouse watch.

"What a neat watch!" she said. "Does it tell you the time?"

"Of course not!" said the child. "You gotta look at it."

Coach Dan Quinn of the Atlanta Falcons has a clock on his desk.

--No, it is not a Mickey Mouse clock--

Where there should be numbers on the face of the clock,
instead is the word NOW 12 times.

No matter what time it is, the time is always now.

We have this hope that now is the time for the healing of God's people.

Healing always starts with the tiniest, smallest of ways, of signs, of acts.

Robert Raines said,

"God speaks to us in [God's] own sign language - a baby.

Not much.

A small December child.

A baby is birth, beginnings, potential without guarantee.

A baby is helpless, but not hopeless.

A baby is someone to watch.

A baby is the future - appearing now.

Are there baby-signs from God signaling hope to us watchers on the hillsides?"

Anticipation

For the past several years Christian Church and United Church of Christ
clergy and laity have been working side by side in Ferguson, Missouri.

Good and faithful Christians have walked the streets and sat down

with young people and shopkeepers and police officers

to build community and address the current crisis there.

Our partners in Christ have chosen to see the crisis in Ferguson

--which is similar to crises faced in most every city and hamlet --

to see the crisis as a challenge, as an opportunity for positive social change.

Teenagers who live in Ferguson raised questions

that haunt and hover over all the talk, protests and disruption, fires and anger.

Our friends Revs. Ray and Wendy Miles served a church there,

and were close to the situation.
They testify that young people asked representatives of the Church, in effect,
"You are here now.

Where were you when our schools became overcrowded,
and our job applications ignored?

You are here now.

Where will you be when this fuss has died down,
and the next crisis erupts someplace else?"

Where were we?

Lord have mercy, we've erred and strayed like lost sheep.

Where will we be?

Spirit of the Living God, we're called to live out and live into your promise.
In the meantime, let us be God's love, incarnate, here, in the Now.

Anticipation

The birth of Jesus Christ is God's investment
in you, in me, in the human condition.

The birth of Christ in Bethlehem
and in the messiness and fullness and beauty of our lives
is an act of hope.

The Good News is God did not wait until all was peachy-keen
to give the world hope.

It is into the saddest scenes that God's light shines through, and gives us hope

"First Coming" by Madeleine L'Engle

*[Jesus Christ] did not wait till the world was ready,
till [people] and nations were at peace.*

*He came when the Heavens were unsteady,
and prisoners cried out for release.*

He did not wait for the perfect time.

He came when the need was deep and great.

*He dined with sinners in all their grime,
turned water into wine. He did not wait*

*till hearts were pure. In joy he came
to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.*

*To a world like ours, of anguished shame
he came, and his Light would not go out.*

*He came to a world which did not mesh,
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.*

*In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
the Maker of the stars was born.*

*We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!*

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

[1] Abraham J. Heschel, The Prophets, Harper Press, 1962, Page 114