

## Pastor's Message – 11/27/22

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 2:1-5

Matthew 24:36-44

Psalm 122

Has anyone seen any Christmas commercials on the television yet? I don't watch a lot of television, so I've been somewhat protected from the onslaught so far, but as the church season of Advent begins today, the 27<sup>th</sup> of November, we are already midway through the Christmas shopping season, and weeks into the expanding season of Christmas music. In this season, our journeys take us more to the mall than to the mountain of God. Our transformation involves turning cash into gifts more than anything else.

But it's Advent! Surely the season speaks for itself; no need for us to remember and reconsider and reflect on what Advent means. But there are always questions: how soon do Christmas decorations go up? When can we start singing Christmas carols as Sunday worship? How early is too early for Christmas parades and the Santa train to come into Columbus? These are questions that I struggle with and maybe you do too.

I've seen some attempts for the Church to fight fire with fire by starting Advent 2 weeks earlier. Maybe the problem with Advent is that it comes too late. But finally, the Word of God comes to Isaiah, he sees a vision, and the prophet then begins our Advent season with a call back to God. On this first Sunday of Advent, we kick off the season of waiting and expectation. As our first banner reminds us, today is the "Sunday of Hope." Isaiah lays a vision before us, calling us to never give up hope.

It reminds me of a great story that I love to tell.

An old man lay dying in his bed. On death's doorstep, he suddenly smelled the aroma of his favorite chocolate chip cookie wafting up the stairs. He gathered his remaining strength and lifted himself from the bed. Leaning against the wall, he slowly made his way out of the bedroom, and with even greater effort forced himself down the stairs, gripping the railing with both hands.

With labored breath, he leaned against the door frame, gazing into the kitchen. Were it not for death's agony, he would have thought himself already in heaven. There, spread out on paper grocery bags on the kitchen table were dozens and dozens of his favorite chocolate chip cookies.

Was it heaven? Or was it one final act of heroic love from his devoted wife, seeing to it that he left this world a happy man? Mustering one great final effort, he lunged toward the table and fell to his knees. The aged and withered hand, shaking, reached up over the edge of the table toward a still warm cookie, when he was suddenly smacked with a spatula by his wife.

"Stay out of those," she said. "They're for the funeral."

There are times when hope for a better future is rekindled, and life slaps us down.

Like the other morning. I turned on the radio before I started my exercise just in time to hear about another mass shooting. How do we keep up hope in times of shootings and earthquakes, war and tensions between nations and people? We smell

the cookies, heaven on earth, and then something happens, and Isaiah's vision seems too good to be true.

We can only shake our heads. When we read Isaiah 2:1-5, we usually skip to the prophecy, and rightly so. It is what is so compelling, what is so radical. The prophecy is what drives us this Advent season. We lean into those words so completely, so hopefully. Even though we doubt the reality of the words. It's a naive fantasy, we think, that there could be peace. All we see is war, conflict, and enemies.

How do we prepare for the unimaginable? We no longer expect the return of Jesus before the end of this generation. We can prepare for illness and dramatic weather events, for the loss of power or the loss of a job. We can try to prepare for the death of a loved one, and yet the end always carries more pain than we imagine. The things that break us open are beyond our human preparation. So, how do we prepare for the coming — or another coming — of Jesus?

Even as the people of Isaiah's time went merrily down the path that led them to destruction, Isaiah saw the Word. He saw another way, another hope. It seems to me that the call of Advent is not to proclaim doom, but to see hope, to see possibilities, even when no one else can see them. We are called to not give up on hope and to walk in the light of the Lord. Walk by the light we see in hope; move toward the kind of world God has in store; work for what makes for peace—even while we work to repair what is broken.

Isaiah proclaims that there is a day coming, the day of peace when ALL people will gather at God's mountain to learn and live in God's way and the world will no longer feel the need for the weapons of war. In the world where there is so much violence and discord among people, this proclamation of Isaiah is an unimaginable surprise. The political chasm among opposing thoughts and beliefs, war and violence among the nations, racism and discrimination towards the "other," mistrust and fear of another all seems unresolvable, and we wonder how can this be?

It is hard for us to imagine the world Isaiah is proclaiming. But imagine, we must. Because through our imagination, we can see the vision of God in the words of Isaiah just as this is the "word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw" (vs.1). And when we see the world God has in mind for us, then we can actively join and participate in what God is doing to make the vision a reality. When we imagine and see, then we can begin the creative process of living into the world that God envisions for us. This Advent season, this season of preparing and waiting for the coming of Christ, we need to fire up our imagination if we are going to faithfully prepare and wait for the coming Christ.

Isaiah proclaims a day when "...they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks..." He envisions a day when tools that were used to destroy life are now turned into tools that are life giving. This is God's unimaginable surprise. The world without the need for swords and spears is surprising enough, but that they would actually be turned into tools of tending and growing life is the surprise that is beyond our imagination. Who would have thought that the swords and spears, the tools of war and destruction can be turned into tools to help life grow and flourish.

As God the teacher, judge and arbitrator works with humanity to bring people together as the beloved community, there is transformation of about face, of 180° change in the way people relate to each other and treat one another. It is not the swords and spears themselves that change into plowshares and pruning hooks. It is the people who use them who no longer found the reason to use them for destruction but found new ways of being and thus needed new tools for their new life. So, what are the “swords and spears” in our world?

It's not swords and spears today, but when do we turn the guns that kill people into plowshares? When do we transform the tools of violence into things that build up instead of tear down, lead people to the light, and grow the kingdom of God in today's world? When do the nations of the world put down the bombs and artillery of conflict? When do the nations and people of this world and this time get serious about enacting measures to protect the future from climate change?

Jesus' words in our reading from the gospel of Matthew today give us an answer: *Be ready*. “Keep awake therefore,” he says.

Again, in verse 44, this message is repeated: “Be ready.”

*Be ready to welcome the presence of Jesus.*

*Be ready to be a servant of God.*

*Be ready to live as we're supposed to live.*

*Be ready to act in the interests of the kingdom.*

*Be ready to be faithful.*

Being ready doesn't mean being passive. Isaiah sees a vision from God. It says,

*They will hammer their swords into plowshares*

*and their spears into pruning hooks.*

*Nation will no longer fight against nation,*

*nor train for war anymore.*

*Come, descendants of Jacob,*

*let us walk in the light of the LORD! (Isaiah 2:4b-5)*

That's us! We are the descendants of Jacob!

In our Advent Wreath ceremony today and in our Opening Prayer, Psalm 122 gives us another hint of what we can do. Psalm 122 invites us to see Jerusalem as a city of peace, a city bound firmly together, a city of destination and fulfillment of the divine vision. Psalm 122 invites us to the city of God, a city not bound by geography or time, but a city that can exist here and now.

Isaiah's message is not just for the people of his time. Jesus' message is not just for the people of his time. Jesus warns, “Then two will be in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken, and one will be left” (v. 40). The apostle Paul reinforces the idea that there is a Rubicon that one crosses, there's a point of no return, there's a missed opportunity and additional chances are not possible. He writes to the Corinthians: “Now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!” (2 Corinthians 6:2).

Our text today is the *carpe diem* of the New Testament. Seize the day! Stay awake. Prepare and get ready! We haven't a moment to lose! In short, we prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ, the coming of grace, the coming of God into our lives by living as though it has already happened.

I've never really heard the whole story; perhaps you haven't either. But I expect you have asked the question, maybe your children or grandchildren have asked the question: If there is only one North Pole Santa Claus, how can he be found on every street corner and in every store? In houses with gas heat and no fireplace, how is Santa going to visit a home without a chimney. Then there is the question of how he can travel the globe, visit every home, all in one night? And the reindeer, how do they fly absent of wings?

In September 1871, eight-year-old Virginia Hanlon of West 95th Street in New York City, wondered the same thing. Seeking an answer, she wrote a letter to the *New York Sun*. Her friends were telling her that there was no Santa Claus, and she needed an answer. In her letter to the editor she wrote, "Papa says, 'If you see it in the *Sun*, it's so.' Please tell me the truth, Is there a Santa Claus?"

The reply, written by Francis Pharcellus Church, the editor of the *Sun*, has become a classic. It has become a tradition of most newspapers to print her letter each Christmas Day. His reply began, "Virginia, your little friends are wrong. They have been affected by the skepticism of a skeptical age. They do not believe except they see." Later in the letter Church went on to explain how Santa Claus can be seen.

He wrote, "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus. He exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist, and you know that they abound and give to your life its highest beauty and joy. Alas! how dreary would be the world if there were no Santa Claus! It would be as dreary as if there were no Virginias. There would be no childlike faith then, no poetry, no romance to make tolerable this existence. We should have no enjoyment, except in sense and sight. The external light with which childhood fills the world would be extinguished." Then Church penned a line that is often overlooked, "The most real things in the world are those that neither children nor men can see."

The last line of the letter borders on the prophetic: "No Santa Claus! Thank God! he lives and lives forever. A thousand years from now, Virginia, nay 10 times 10,000 years from now, he will continue to make glad the heart of childhood."

And we all can recall the classic closing line that Church wrote, "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus."

"In those days," Isaiah writes. He could have just as likely said, "In the last days of November 2022, when hatred fuels violence in nightclubs and in the Walmart of Chesapeake, and war rages on in Ukraine, in Yemen, and so many other places, it is not easy to believe that war shall be no more. Fortunately, the light of the Advent candle burns brightly, calling us to believe and walk in the light of the Lord.

This is the word of hope.

This is the word of the first Sunday of Advent.

"The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God is at hand."