

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 ploughshares,
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!

Matthew 24:36-44

[Jesus said:]

"But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 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, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. 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. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. 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. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

Getting Ready

Matthew 24: 33-44

November 27, 2016

Today marks the beginning of Advent and our readings this morning share a theme of expectation and hope for a future where God reigns and where people or nations will flock to his teaching and walk in His paths. It is a time of preparation, a time of looking toward the coming again of the Messiah both now and future, a time of great expectation and great anticipation.

But exactly what is it that we anticipate? What are we getting ready for? What do we expect to happen? Do we anticipate the end of the world, as some religious cults always do at this time of year? Are we preparing our hearts and spirits to receive again the coming of the Christ child into the world? Or are we preparing for yet another month-long shopping spree that some have called "economic first-degree murder" – willfully and with malice aforethought murdering our bank accounts? Or maybe we're getting ready for the seven to ten pounds the average American will gain during the season (Lord, please let me be an underachiever this year!)?

Are we getting ready for the depression, the anxiety, and even the rage that accompanies the secular holiday season? If we allow ourselves to get caught up in the 'consumer Christmas', we can easily find that instead of preparing to sing "O Holy Night" we will find ourselves living out one holy nightmare.

Our readings this morning ask us to consider how we are preparing not only for the end of time or the second coming of Jesus, but also how are we preparing to live each and every day, in the most common of ways. Like grinding meal or working in fields of labor, or locking our doors, or going to work each day as a child of the coming Christ. How are we getting ready for Christmas? How are we Awake to what is happening around us?

As I consider the season of Advent which seems to coincide each year with black Friday, (which I experienced firsthand working at Lowes,) and tomorrow's Cyber Monday, I can't help but make a comparison to the ways in which the world prepares for Christmas and the way we as followers of Christ might be preparing.

So how are you getting ready for Christmas? How are you waiting in hope, peace, joy, and love? We aren't always good at waiting for things especially in this country. We want what we want and we want it now! I don't know about you but I watched in fascinated horror and disbelief at the many videos posted on Facebook and the news of people lining up outside of Wal-Marts and other stores all over the country in what appeared to be mob scenes.

There were some very frightened employees on one side of a barricade and all the eager shoppers on the other and then suddenly, all heck breaks loose and people are storming the barricade or jumping over it to be the first in the door where they are sure they will find whatever it is they seek. They are seeking some deep fulfillment that apparently can't be found anywhere else. This is how some of the world is getting ready for Christmas. So I'm asking again, "how are you getting ready for Christmas?"

I don't honestly think those shoppers are going to find what they are looking for because what they are really looking for cannot be found there. In fact I don't know if you can actually find it by trying to find it if you know what I mean? You can't hunt God down like you can an iPod or flat screen TV or whatever toy you need for little Mary or Billy. God arrives in God's own good time which is part of the mystery of the Advent story isn't it?

No, finding God reminds me very much of one of our cats named Esme who I've mentioned before. (She is my prayer partner if you remember.) When my granddaughter Leah, who is crazy about cats, comes to visit, she tries her best to track that cat down and get her to stand still long enough to pet her.

But Esme will not be tracked down however, and usually hides behind one of the pieces of furniture upstairs when the children arrive. But if you will sit still in the recliner upstairs, and it has to be this specific chair, don't ask me why, she will eventually come and jump up in your lap and sit with you, as long as you are calm and ready. For me this is how we often connect with God. We must be still and we must be calm and sit and wait.

“Be still and know that I am God is what the psalmist often says, so let me ask you again, “How are you preparing for Christmas?”

Now we just went through a week of preparing for Thanksgiving. For some folks, it was hectic and there was lots of cleaning and preparing for company and eating. There were games to watch and games to play. Stories to share and way too much turkey, potatoes, gravy, pie and cake, and whatever else Aunt Betsy brought. And quite frankly the thought of getting ready for another holiday, and I don't really care which one it is, is almost more than one can bear.

And yet, here we are, being called to wait and watch for the Light that is coming into our world. And for me it is just a flicker of hope that is starting to show a little glow. Sort of like this solitary candle this morning. Somehow, I hope there will be a breath of something that will turn it into a small but steady flame, but I'm not sure what, and not sure when?

Maybe that's what today is all about. The first candle has been lit. A candle representing that deep hope we have in God and God's promise for us. Hope for a new beginning, hope for a new year, hope for a new future. Hope for something to break wide open in your heart, but you must wait for it. Nurture it. Cultivate an attitude of hope by walking in the light of the Lord as Isaiah reminded us this morning and being ready for The Christ Child who comes like a thief in the night, when you least expect him. A small but steady light to guide the way.

I read a story recently that reminded me of what I need to do more of as I prepare, as I wait for the Christ child of hope to come, and that is to stay in the light. In her book, 'Kitchen Table Wisdom', Doctor. Rachel Naomi Remen shares a story of when she was about 14 years old, working as a volunteer one summer in a nursing home. After a brief training period, she was assigned to visit with a ninety-six year old woman who had not spoken for a year and was diagnosed with senile dementia. The nurses doubted that the woman would talk to Naomi but hoped she might get involved in some sort of activity like stringing beads together. Naomi tells it like this:

“I didn't want to see this patient. Her great age frightened me and the words senile dementia suggest that not only was she older by far than anyone I had ever met, she was crazy too. I knocked on the closed door but there was no answer. Opening the door, I found myself in a small room lit by a single window which faced the morning sun. Two chairs had been placed in front of the window; in one sat a very old lady, looking out. The other was empty. Uncertain of what to do next, I went to the empty chair and sat down, the basket of beads on my lap. She did not seem to notice that I had come in.

For a while I tried to find some way to open a conversation. I was painfully shy at this time, which was one of the reasons my parents had suggested I take this job

The silence in the room was absolute. Somehow it almost seemed rude to speak, yet I desperately wanted to succeed in my task. I considered and discarded all the ways of making conversation suggested in the training. None of them seemed possible. The old woman continued to look toward the window, her face half hidden from me, barely breathing. Finally I simply gave up and sat with the basket of beads in my lap for the full hour. It was quite peaceful.

The silence was broken at last by the little bell signaling the end of the morning activity. Taking hold of the basket again, I prepared to leave. But I was only fourteen and curiosity overcame me. Turning to the old woman, I asked, "What are you looking at?" I immediately flushed. Prying into the lives of the residents was strictly forbidden. Perhaps she had not heard. But she had. Slowly she turned toward me and I could see her face for the first time. It was radiant. In a voice filled with joy she said, "Why, child, I am looking at the Light."

Many years later, as a pediatrician, I would watch newborns look at light with that same rapt expression, almost as if they were listening for something.

A ninety-six-year old woman may stop speaking because arteriosclerosis has damaged her brain, or she has become psychotic and she is no longer able to speak. But she may also have withdrawn into a space between the worlds, to contemplate what is next, to spread her sails and patiently wait to catch the light." (*From Kitchen Table Wisdom by Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D.*)

Isn't that how we are living too? Living between worlds? Between what is to come and what is now? And in this season of Advent we too must patiently spread our sails and wait to catch the light, to walk in the light together as we make the journey toward Bethlehem. For when we least expect him he arrives.

One of my favorite Advent Hymns is ***People, Look East***, and the first verse goes "*People look east. The time is near of the crowning of the year. Make your house fair as you are able, trim the hearth and set the table. People look east and sing today: Love the guest is on the way.*"

So let me ask you again, "How are you getting ready for Christmas?" Because Christmas is coming. *Love the guest is on the way.* He is coming, whether you are ready or not, both now and in the future. So, be still and look for the Light my friends. Look for the Light! Let's pray.

Advent Prayer

Lord Jesus,
Master of both the light and the darkness,
send your Holy Spirit upon our preparations for Christmas.

We who have so much to do
seek quiet spaces to hear your voice each day.

We who are anxious over many things
look forward to your coming among us.

We who are blessed in so many ways
long for the complete joy of your kingdom.

We whose hearts are heavy
seek the joy of your presence.

We are your people,
walking in darkness, yet seeking the light.
To you we say, "Come Lord Jesus!" ~ written by Fr. Henri J. M. Nouwen.