

The Light of the Prophets

Isaiah 2:1-5

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Rev. Cynthia Cochran-Carney, First Presbyterian Church of San Rafael

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

In days to come

the mountain of God'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 Holy One,

to the house of the God of Jacob

and be taught God's ways and that we may walk in these paths."

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of God from Jerusalem.

God 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 God.

I was in Orange County last week visiting our younger son Josh. As we drove toward Newport Beach to meet some friends, a memory came back to me. A memory about something I did in early December when I was in elementary school, about 4th grade. We went out on the ocean to go whale watching. When we got on the boat in the morning, the ocean made the boat bob up and down slowly. Not much wind. Clear sky. I soaked in the breeze, delighting in the sense of adventure that I felt. We chased some whales and it was so exciting.

But coming back later that day, it was a different story. The winds had picked up. The waves hitting the boat were getting higher. Where once there was an intrepid adventurer, there was now one sea-sick soul. One of the boat crew saw that I and other students were not feeling well. He said, "Sit down, find a point on the shoreline and focus on it."

And so I did. There was, on the sandy shore, a building I could see and it had a lighted sign on the top. And I kept my eyes on it. As I did so, I began to visualize life back on terra-firma...in a warm, dry setting. And after a while, my stomach became calmer, my head cleared. I began to breathe deeply. I made it. This whole scene came back to me as I thought about Isaiah passage.

The world in which Isaiah lived was a choppy, chaotic, unjust, warring world. Israel was a storm-tossed nation, threatened by the powerful Assyrians to the north and east and menaced by the Egyptians to the south and west. The king and his advisors were occupied with what they needed to do to protect themselves. Events were getting out of their control. Fear was running rampant.

Isaiah wrote these verses about 740 BC, a time when spirits were low in Judah. Many people doubted God's power to preserve the dynasty of David in accordance with the promise; others believed themselves to be invincible in the face of enemies.

There was a growing sense that people focused on their own needs and survival. And the waters stirred and stirred, and people began to sink. The neediest of the needy, orphans and widows, were neglected. Others concentrated their efforts on building bigger and stronger armadas to fight the mighty armadas of other storm-tossed nations.

But out of that turmoil, out of that storm-tossed world, there was one voice that stood out. A voice of God's voice – the Prophet Isaiah. The book we now have was probably written by a prophet by that name and later by people who wrote in the same style and calling. Isaiah often uses visual images. Listen again to beginning of the passage - “The word that Isaiah, son of Amoz, *saw* concerning Judah and Jerusalem.” We don't talk that way. We would say, “The word that Isaiah, son of Amoz *heard*...”

What does it mean to *see* a word? I doubt that this was an early reference to texting or tweeting! Isaiah wanted people to see vividly in their minds and hearts. To the world that was warring and killing and groping and sinking in the angry sea, Isaiah rose up and called out:

*"Look! Focus your eyes upon the mountain of the house of the Lord...there on the shore....
For it shall rise up and be established as the highest of the mountains...
And people of all races will come and say:
'Let us make our way together to the mountain of the Holy One, ...,
And that we may walk in God's paths.'
...And they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks...
.... Walk in God's light."*

A mountain where all people would come – pilgrimage for hope and truth and unity
Turning tools for war into tools for growing food
A light for the path.

Was Isaiah just being a foolhardy idealist, impractical and other-worldly? Or is it possible that he was realist of his age, that this vision penetrated more deeply into the essence of reality?

He had a vision, a vision of God's vision. And the thing that separated him from the others was that he actually believed that message from God, that the sickness which overcomes us and draws us toward the myriad of our idolatries and misdirected loyalties must be stopped.

The future of our planet has always depended upon people, at least a remnant of people, fixing their hearts, minds and souls on an alternative vision...on a landmark on the shore. And without that vision, the prophet says, the people perish. Today I sense this vision of people of faith coming together – not one religion but all religious and spiritual paths. Following one light.

I think Isaiah was not simply pointing to the future. Rather, he was speaking about the present moment. Did you notice how he began this prophecy? "In days to come," reads the NRSV translation. "In days to come..." But the literal Hebrew is a bit more nuanced. "In the back of the days," or better yet, "In the midst of the present." Isaiah is suggesting that the present moment is ripe, or to use an appropriate Advent term, pregnant with God's presence.

Maybe the prophet's gift is not to see magically into the future, but to have a spirit which discerns the mystery of the present. That mystery is that our history and our lives are lived against a larger reality. The day when people "shall beat their swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks." Live into that vision now even as we wait and hope.

Advent is a gift to us - the darkness and hush of these weeks before Christmas. A time of preparation and awareness, a waiting that lets us feel our longing for hope.

Are we ready for Advent? We're all turkeyed out, fridge of leftovers and wonder about how to think about this Holiday season. Maybe we wanted to plunge in with lights and joy and gatherings, but are also wondering how to remain healthy and keep Covid virus from infecting holiday plans. How might we begin this journey of prayerful, joyful waiting and watching for the light? Of holding onto a vision of shalom?

The first Sunday of Advent we are invited to see how the light of Isaiah and other prophets can help us find our way. Be bold about the future. Be willing to wrestle with deeper questions in this season of shorter days and more darkness. Throughout scripture the prophets have a profound role. They speak to the people for God, telling the people what God has done, or will do; standing in the gap they interpret God to the people.

But they also raise their voices to God on the people's behalf. They interpret the people to God. They are emboldened to convey the message back and forth, the prophets are both the messengers of God and the voice of the people's true experience back to God.

Advent is also a time that is an invitation to deep honesty, to step into the shoes of the prophets- to see the world with stark candor and not be afraid to bring our fears and

questions to God, and also to speak into the world the hope of a God who enters in. A God who comes near. A God who shares all of it. A God who sees brokenness in us and our world and knows what breaks our hearts. And joins us just as we are and offers just enough light for our way.

This Advent, let's be people of Hope. For each other and for the world that will be rushing through to Christmas with smiles plastered on their faces and God at a distance. Let's be prophets who give voice to our longing for Divine compassion and companionship, and who recognize that the steadfast love of God holds us even when it doesn't feel like it and even when we are not sure we deserve it.

Whatever stormy seas of sadness or grief or fear or worry you may be navigating in this season of Advent, fix your eyes on a point and trust in God's light and love to show you the way home. Amen.