

COMMENTARY

ADVENT I - 2007

Texts:

First Lesson:

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! Isaiah 2:1-5

Second Lesson:

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. Romans 13:8-14

Gospel:

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. Matthew 24:37-44

Prologue

For my reflection this week I initially wanted to lay down some heavy thoughts from Isaiah's passage; about beating swords into plowshares, and nations

that would study war no more. I started there; but I kept being led back to the deeper, ultimate all-encompassing hope of Isaiah's future vision; about the Lord's house "established as the highest of the mountains." (Isaiah 2:1-5)

Then, as I thought about the season, I thought about some of our folksy customs; how Advent begins with simple, unadorned evergreens, an empty manger, and a lone, lit candle. Not terribly festive. Not yet. There's nothing but a *flicker of hope* in "the fading glory of these autumn days, when night creeps early on to darkness; and leaves us, bound in shadows, longing for the light." It's that flicker of hope that I wanted to talk about.

A Season of Hope

But, besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day. Romans 13:11-14

This last week, mid-way through the Middle East peace talks in Baltimore, Maryland, a newscaster was interviewing a prominent official, seeking his opinion on the chances of a successful outcome.

The official first recapped the historical failures of previous attempts; and then proceeded to outline the seemingly insurmountable challenges at this present time. He spoke of how conditions now seemed more dire than ever before, how Israelis and Palestinians had greater reason than ever before to distrust one another; that there was more reason than ever before to assert their own form of power, dominance and terror over the other.

That is, they might continue to employ their military superiority on the one hand, or the insurrection's trade on the other, in the vain hope that the undaunted perpetuation of such terror, fear and dread would finally triumph over their adversary. And all this, despite the stark, obvious reality that it never has ... at least, not yet.

The interviewer asked him again, "Then what gives you any more reason to hope for a different outcome now, how an accord could be achieved this time, when you say conditions now would make it seem even less likely ... ?"

He replied, "It is precisely because of that, because things seem more hopeless now, more than ever before, I cannot abandon hope. I have to hope the

impossible is possible.” When pressed further, he went on to say he was a pragmatic optimist; essentially because the present alternative – the way things seem to be -- was simply unacceptable.

I took this to mean he refused to believe that which – to all outward signs seemed undeniably self-evident as the way things are – would continue to define what would ultimately prevail as the reality of this world.

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So, I've been thinking this week about hope, and how universal a theme it is to the human experience:

- Presidential candidates speak and write about the audacity of hope.
- Diplomats delicately dance around thorny, un-resolvable issues and refuse to relinquish the possibility of hope
- And certainly preachers like to talk about hope as one of the three great, divine virtues; along with faith and love ... The greatest is love, Saint Paul says; but hope ain't bad.

There's a greeting card section in the local drugstore dedicated to Hope. It's more commonly categorized as Encouragement, or Support:

“Hope you're feeling better.”

“Hope you're not as lonely as you were; just remember, you're not forgotten.”

“Hope you haven't given up hope.”

Or, the colloquial “Hang in there.”

Sometimes it helps. But sometimes it doesn't sound so much like “hope.” As in:

“Hope you haven't smashed the car again.” Or,

“Hope you haven't burned the pot roast.”

Hope can be audacious, I suppose. But it can also be obnoxious, like a superficial panacea; especially when accompanied by a prescription to pick yourself up and shake off whatever's getting' ya down.

Because sometimes people are down for a reason. And sometimes it's a pretty good one. And it's not always a matter of wallowing there; but recognizing it for what it is. That may be the only way to do

something about it; including realizing there may be nothing *you alone* can do about it. Which brings me to Advent.

In the more liturgical traditions of the Christian faith, the Church Year has always had this funny thing about starting over. But we don't jump in and start off with the remembrance and celebration of the birth of the baby Jesus; but rather the *imminent advent* of that holy nativity, and what that could possibly mean for us.

Hoping Christmas comes, *really* comes, is a season -- and a different reality, and way of being in this world -- that precedes what we still, in so many ways, hope will happen. Someday, we hope, Christmas really will come.

Put another way, the “Spirit of Christmas Past” is but a prelude to the Second Coming; which we hope will be the first Christmas ultimately worth really celebrating.

The Feast of the Holy Nativity (Christmas) is about the first cast of characters (but certainly not the last) to arrive, one by one, at the manger; in order to see what *real* hope *really* looks like. It's about those willing to make this journey to the least likely place on earth, and peer into a feed box to find what the real nature of God's reign is all about; expressed in the weak, the powerless, the marginalized and outcast. Such audacity! Such audacity of hope.

Advent also comes with its own warning: Be careful what you hope for. We may think it will come on December 25th, just like the calendar says. Think again, the gospel passage this evening tells us.

It may come when you least expect it. Which, I take to mean, it'll come like a thief in the night; sneaking in to relieve you of your callow presumptions, your comfortable biases, limited expectations, and maybe even your best intentions, hopes and dreams. It's about God's will and God's time, breaking in to turn our presumptuous, preposterous world upside down.

And not only that, it not only comes with a warning, but a challenge, as well. We can challenge a God of all hopefulness, just as he challenges our belief in a God who will define what is ultimately real, authentic and divine about this world in which we live; in which “Emmanuel” comes to live with us.

Simply put, Advent confronts us with the question whether we can believe in -- and hold fast to -- that reality we come to know and call *gospel*. That, and an impossible (and sometimes even unwelcome) hope; which is the first step in that journey.

Amen.

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