

Longing for Light

Sunday, November 27, 2022

The First Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 2:1-5

by Rev. Dr. Chris Keating

Isaiah's words initiate our Christmas countdown. They are a signal that Christmas time, with all of its memories, traditions, and emotions, is drawing near. But more than our secular celebrations, Advent initiates our stepping into sacred time.

Last week's warmer temperatures seemed to inspire more than a few in our neighborhood to get an early start putting up their Christmas lights. I'm not even sure if the week before Thanksgiving counts as early anymore! There were a fair number of houses which seemed to switch seamlessly from Halloween straight to Christmas. It left a few of us wondering what to do with the Valentine's Day wreaths on our front doors.

This is how Advent begins, at least for many. Truthfully, we rush beyond Advent and straight to Christmas. There is a race to be the first one to plug in your lights, to be the first to send cards, wrap packages, bake cookies and all of the other trappings of the season.

I wonder: what's the hurry? I believe the world rushes toward Christmas to embrace memories of joy and happiness, to feel as if we are filled with renewed sense of closeness to loved ones, even if our experiences never match that ideal. We speed up the holidays because of the endorphin rush that inflates us with feelings of joy—sort of like those inflatable Snoopy's and Santa Claus' that pop up around our neighborhoods.

But drive around those neighborhoods in the early morning hours, and all you see are deflated skins lying lifeless on the ground. In similar fashion, when our lives become hooked on the sped-up Christmas, we are often disappointed, left lifeless and empty.

In this secular age, as theologian Andrew Root argues, “time itself has been emptied of the sacred.”¹ He is writing about the church and Christians in a secular time. Too often, he argues, the church concedes to this notion of secular time. In doing so, we trade our mission of pondering God’s time for an ever-moving machine that does nothing but grind up our souls and scatter them like trash.

Advent calls us away from such weariness. We hope that the lights of Christmas will brighten our lives, but the reality is that we often awaken feeling as deflated as our neighbor’s blow up sleigh and reindeer when the power gets turned off.

What we need is to take a chance on God’s promise this Advent.

Isaiah lived in 8th century Jerusalem. He is well aware of the price God’s people will pay for ignoring God’s promises. He sees that those who have traded God’s promises – God’s sense of timing – for a sped-up version of life are headed for trouble. He sees the burdens that have been placed on the poor, the offerings given that do not reflect changed lives, the injustices done to the orphan and the widow. He sees the violence that has devoured the land, which threatens to undo all that God has promised to Jerusalem.

He looks around and sees that this sped-up version of life has created cities burned with fire, and land that has become an empty wasteland. He surveys the landscape and finds a city pitted by corruption, riddled with violence, and bent on self-destruction. His tone is harsh and filled with judgment on those who have disobeyed God.

Suddenly, however, as if he was preaching by the light of a single candle, the prophet’s tone changes in chapter two. “In days to come,” he writes, reciting words that are nearly synonymous with Advent. “In those days,” Matthew and Luke will both tell us soon. In those days, a child will be born. In those days magi shall appear, in those days John the Baptist shall appear in the wilderness, calling for the people of God to repent and be baptized.

In days to come. In times when candles are lit, and carols sung. In moments when kids put on their dad’s bathrobes and are transformed into kings and shepherds. In moments when Mary pats her belly, pondering all these things. In days to come, in moments marked by sacred time.

¹ Andrew Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age*, p. 53.

Andy Root suggests that sacred time is marked by encounters with God and with each other. In these depth encounters we sense something new is happening. Our feelings of constant fatigue and emptiness are replaced with hope.

Hope in the days to come. Hope that comes from the light of a single candle. Hope that emerges from knowing we are loved not because of our accomplishments or achievements, but simply because we are valued by God. Hope that ends violence by turning weapons into gardening tools.

These are the words ignite our Christmas countdown. Isaiah's voice, breathless with excitement, lifts Israel's expectations beyond the pain of their present to anticipate a future shaped by God. But his cries also ignite our own hopes and deepest yearnings. Lighting the first candle of Advent, we enter a new season, a new chance to discover hope. The countdown to Christmas begins as the familiar words prickle against our ears, "In the days to come."

"In the days to come," Isaiah proclaims, "the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest mountains." It is an invitation that reminds Judah that all nations will be drawn to Jerusalem, and that blacksmiths will pound swords into gardening tools, and warfare will no longer be practiced. One candle, shining against a gray horizon. One candle, blown about by wind and rain. One candle, shining against all odds.

Isaiah calls us to take a chance on Advent. He calls us to imagine the possibilities God will offer us: possibilities of peace that is real and lasting, possibilities of a future not shaped by shadows of violence and bloodshed, but in the soil of God's good garden.

The venerable King James Version renders the verse in deeper tones of Advent: "And it shall come to pass," it reads, words as synonymous with Christmas as angels and newborns. And it shall come to pass, the prophet promises--lifting our eyes above the refuse of human suffering and pain and focuses our eyes on the substructures of the Lord's house established on the highest peaks.

The prophet's instructions are clear: in the days to come, all people will walk in the light of the Lord. In the days to come, soon. This is the promise that invites us to take a chance this Advent.

When our kids were younger it would take great effort to stave off the commercialism associated with Christmas and the promises that Santa brings whatever you want. Walking through stores crammed with merchandise generally initiated a familiar litany of what everyone wanted. The response would normally be, “Christmas is coming,” followed by “That’s what you always say!”

The days are coming, we are told, when God’s instruction shall be recited anew, and when all nations shall beat swords in plowshares and weapons into gardening tools, and “national shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.”

Words so powerful that they are engraved on a wall across the street from the United Nations. Every day, the world gathers at that place, greeted by Isaiah’s vision—a promise that disrupts the prevailing ways of the world.

It is what we always say—and that becomes part of the problem. In the days to come, we will light more candles, and say more prayers. In days to come, we will participate in all the familiar moments of the season, rehearsing once again the promise that there will be born to us in the city of David a Savior. But also, there will likely be more mass shootings, as there have been at least one per day in 2022. The totals are staggering, and our affirmations that one day they shall learn war no more begins to sound hollow. Perhaps within us there is a little part that talks back to God: “But that’s what you always say.”

When Richard Fierro retired as a major in the United States Army, he said “I was done with war.” As a veteran of two deployments to Afghanistan, Fierro had earned two bronze stars. He had pulled friends from wreckages of bombed vehicles and witnessed more carnage than he cares to recall. He was done with war, until the shooting began last week at a nightclub in Colorado Springs. Attending a show with his wife and daughter, Fierro saw the flashes of gun fire and immediately went into combat mode. He ran across the club. With the help of others, he subdued the shooter, and probably saved many lives.

Thankfully, he took his chance. God uphold another possibility, one that was risky for Isaiah and perhaps even more risky for us today. God holds up the light of hope, the possibility of grace and peace shining in the darkness. God calls us to take a chance this Advent, and to await the coming of Christ by shedding works of darkness and clinging to hope. Amen.