

Words for the Beginning of Advent 2007 Isa.2:1-5. Mt.24:36-44 December 2, 2007
Rev. Joyce Kirk-Moore San Dimas Community Church, United Church of Christ

Today we begin again. We put up our symbols to begin Advent, the season of waiting, of longing, of expecting. As people have done throughout the ages, we place evergreen wreaths around us to remind us that even in the dead of winter, if we look hard enough, we can see the promise that life goes on.

We light our Advent wreath, like people long ago, who in winter when wagon wheels were useless because they'd get stuck in the mud and slush of snow, took them off, cleaned them up, hung them from the rafters for storage, and then decorated them with greenery and candles to light the darkness of their homes. Perhaps they were early chandeliers.

We place a Christmas tree inside to remind us that nature belongs to God, and that as steadfast and faithful as God is, life in its fullness will return to us in the spring. Yet, in the depths of winter, whether in nature or in the winter of our souls, important things happen. Something is going on inside the dead-looking bulbs of tulips and daffodils buried deep in the dirt. And something is happening in the tired, dead, cold places of our souls. It is hard to be patient and wait for all that must happen before new signs of life emerge.

Some of us are old enough to remember when churches were the *centers* of this transformation from life, through death, into new life. Today churches compete with many good organizations of transformation--like UNICEF, OXFAM, Save the Children, Save Darfur, Inland Valley Hope Partners--all organizations which I've given to this year because they are places of transformation.

But I long for the church, including but not limited to this church, to take the lead once again in proclaiming through word and deeds, that the Spirit of the Risen Christ lives in our midst! I long for us to become *Prophets of Peace*.

One of the worst things for Christianity was when Constantine the Roman emperor of 320 AD was converted to Christianity and made it a "state" religion. He was more of a smart politician than a true convert because he had to do something with all these renegade Christians who were *prophets of peace*. By bringing them into his coalition of governance, he lessened their power and influence. Christianity became beholden to the powers of the Roman world.

Today's Isaiah text talks about the importance of the house of the Lord. First, it is to be on the highest mountain. Mountains are where people go to meet God; this mountain is to be the highest, the focus of everyone's attention. People will encourage one another to "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths."

And what are God's ways that they are to learn? The people will learn that God is an arbitrator, a peace maker, and they will not learn war any more. That's verse 4. It is clear that we are humans who fall short of the glory of God and God's ways, and wars are symbols of our failures to arbitrate and make peace, but at least we should make every effort to go up to the mountain, the house of God, and learn God's ways.

This week I mailed Christmas packages to James and Michael who are on our prayer list and who are in Iraq, and as I mailed them, the tears were this close to the surface and my heart was breaking. They are there because our world has not fully learned the ways of God, which are to beat our swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks and to study war no more.

The lesson from the gospel also takes place in the house of God. Zechariah was a priest, just not a very good one. When Gabriel announces to Zechariah that he and his wife will have a

son, named John, Zechariah says: “no way.” (my translation). At least that was what he must have been thinking; he was too afraid not to be polite to Gabriel, so he says: “how will I know that this is so?” So Gabriel gives Zechariah a long time-out--nine months--to think about whether he really wants to shun his role in God’s history. During this time, Zechariah cannot speak.

The church has been in a long time-out of muteness. We have not always been the prophetic voice teaching God’s ways. We have moved from the center of spiritual and social responsibility to a gathering place of friends who like to socialize together. We come wanting our children to learn good morals; we come to marry, baptize, and bury. Church helps us to be good people, but for most of us, the church, is not the only (and maybe not the primary) place of our good works in the world. We forget that church is not primarily meant to get us to heaven; church is meant to bring heaven to earth.

The texts of Isaiah and Luke are written to desperate people in desperate times. We are living in desperate times. You all look in pretty good shape (not too desperate), but we live in times when many people are desperate. They need to know that in the dead winter of their lives something will grow again. And they need more than just a word of hope. They need a light to go on in their darkness; a candle to be lit so that they can see hope.

Hope is revealed when people see something that says to them that the future will be different than their present. The church is to be that something that lights a candle of hope in the darkness. We are to be prophets of peace and hope. Initially when God called prophets to action there was a lot of excuse making. Moses said over and over, “God, I just can’t do what you’re asking me to do. I’m not man enough.” Like Moses, we can make excuses or we can cut the excuses and say “here I am, God, I’ll do my best. Through my church, your house, I will become light and hope to a desperate world.”

If we are too busy to “Come to the house of the Lord and learn God’s ways;” if we are too busy and timid to find our voice and so remain mute, our priorities are all screwed up. This doesn’t mean we’re going to start taking church attendance or making a list of when we’re naughty and nice. It means we bring our whole selves to God’s project--our minds, our bodies, our hearts, and strength, our souls.

Perhaps you notice I’m a little worked up today. Friday night I watched Bill Moyers and saw other “Christians” who have formed an organization “Christians United For Israel.” These folks are against any peace in the Middle East that would require Israel to give up land. And it’s not because they love Jews; it’s because they preach a warped Christianity that manipulates Israel and the Jews to be part of an “end time” which they have fabricated from the biblical text. It just isn’t true! They need to “Come to the house of the Lord and learn God’s ways.” Christians United For Israel go so far to suggest that a preemptive strike on Iran may be necessary, to usher in the “end times.” Whatever times they are, the times belong to God, not us, and even what some folks call the angry God of the Old Testament is telling us today in this text to be prophets of peace.

Well, folks, it’s the church’s new year day--in liturgical language. We give ourselves to the idea of pregnancy (something growing inside us) and waiting for something spectacular to be born 23 days from now. What will it be? What will we become because we’ve given ourselves to this Advent, God’s project, God’s dream for the world? Let us begin with hope that in these desperate times and in the desperate places of our world, we will not be ignorant and mute. God help us to find our voice to be prophets of peace and bearers of good news!