

Advent I

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

Isaiah 2: 1

Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on which day your Lord is coming.

Matthew 24: 41

Advent is a time when everything begins again. God is doing something new in the world. Awake! say our poets and prophets. Look alive! Pay attention to the new gifts God is about to give us.

But we have been waiting and hoping for a very long time: hoping for the new Advent, the return of the Messiah. Yearning for the Kingdom of God truly, truly to arrive among us and to transform the world. Praying for peace and justice to prevail.

Thus, the paradox of Advent. We are enjoined to be awake, be alert to the new things going on around us. At the same time, we have been hoping and praying and yearning for so long, so very long. Advent begins with a vision of an alternative world, a healed world, but when will that world arrive?

Here at St. John's, we do not have to look far to see new things going on around us. Right underneath us at this moment, a project that has been a hope and a dream for many years is drawing to completion. Our basement renovation is about to be accomplished.

Now this may seem like a mundane bricks and mortar illustration of an exalted vision and promise. But let's look a little further about what Isaiah is saying in this morning's reading. *In the 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.*

Isaiah here is talking about the city of Jerusalem. His poem is a word, a vision, an imaginative leap that looks beyond the present circumstance, looks through the eyes of God to see what will be, to see what is *not yet*. And what is the prophet looking beyond?

Well, at the time of Isaiah, Jerusalem was a vulnerable, marginal operation. Israel/Palestine has ever been perched precariously at a geographical and political crossroads, and Jerusalem, then, languished or flourished at the behest of the superpowers

of the day. The physical infrastructure was in decline, and corruption was rife. Moreover, to Isaiah's prophetic eye, the city represented a perpetual and provocative problem, the locus of misguided nationalism and self-serving religion. Not a pretty picture.

Against the present material and spiritual scruffiness, and beyond his own present dismay, Isaiah imagines a majestic future for the city. This is the function of promise, and therefore the promise of Advent, in a life of faith. Under promise, faith sees what will be that is not yet. And the ground of that promise; these words in Isaiah, *In the days to come*. This is the formula of promise, and it has two parts. First, the promise is very sure, as certain as the intent of God. Second, the prophet does not know when.

But Isaiah envisions a coming greatness for the city, with all nations streaming to her. For a moment, the prophet succumbs to the grandiosity of political triumphalism. But that moment does not last. Here's the revision. *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 God may teach us God's ways, and that we may walk in God's paths.'*

God's *presence* in Jerusalem is the point and purpose; the prophetic vision is fixed on God. The nations will stream to God's presence, a presence that's in profound tension with worldly power and success. Jerusalem will fulfill her spiritual destiny as the house of God. Thus, the Psalmist

I was glad when they said to me,*
 "Let us go to the house of the Lord.
Now our feet are standing*
 within your gates, O Jerusalem.
Jerusalem is built as a city*
 that is at unity with itself.

Now, some of this history I think we can find relevant for ourselves. The *vulnerable, marginal operation* part, for example. The physical infrastructure being in decline, for example. The reality that the parish has languished or flourished over time not at the behest of superpowers, exactly, but at the mercy of external socio-economic and demographic trends.

But we can also identify ourselves with some of the promise of Isaiah's vision. Throughout the parish's long history there have often been prophets in our midst, proclaiming the urgency of God's mission and the community's part in that mission. There have always been the faithful who continued to follow God's word and example in

the most trying and challenging of times. And there have always, I am sure, been signs here of the *not yet*, signs of the inbreaking of the realm of God in the midst of our life of faith and practice,

2007 is a banner year for us here at St. John's. The parish school project, which has been a dream of ours for years, is nearing completion. This is a milestone of major proportion, representing the work, the sacrificial giving, the prayer, the faithfulness and the vision of so many, many of us. Another milestone is the securing of marriage equality in this Commonwealth, an effort into which this parish has also poured time, money, prayer, and faithfulness. . For these accomplishments we give thanks and praise, and it is fitting to pause and celebrate ourselves in this season of hope and promise.

But Advent is also a season of waiting and expectation. Now that we have realized several of our dreams, what does God's hope and promise for us now entail? To what are we called in this new stage of our journey of faith together? How are we called to fulfill our spiritual destiny as the house of God?

Some of us see great urgency in the call to exercise greater stewardship in our use of energy and other resources, to protect and restore all of God's creation. Some of us are focused on how we can best use our renovated space to do outreach and, as well, to obtain a revenue stream to support and restore our sacred buildings and to support program, as well. Some of us are concerned to evangelize: to spread the good news of our community here at St John's abroad in the wider world. And some believe that we most need to turn our eyes beyond the bounds of our community and participate more fully in the life of the wider church and the city.

These goals are not mutually exclusive. But we remain, at present, a community of limited time and treasure, if not of talent. We need to marshal our resources thoughtfully and prayerfully. And if we are to be effective in our ministry and mission we must stand, as the Psalmist said, *built as a city that is at unity with itself*.

And we can do this. I know we can. The church at Advent watches to see where God is doing justice and making peace. Wherever that is happening, God's assurances are on the move, on the move toward *a new thing*. Our Advent call is to notice, to discern, to receive, and to follow, with eagerness and with joy. Amen.