

Luke 1: 67-79, Isaiah 2:1-5

November 28, 2010 (Advent 1)

Isaiah 2:1-5

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

² 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.

³ 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.

⁴ He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning-hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.

⁵ O house of Jacob,
come, let us walk
in the light of the LORD!

Luke 1:67-79

Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people
and redeemed them.
He has raised up a mighty savior for us
in the house of his servant David,
as he spoke through the mouth
of his holy prophets from of old,
that we would be saved from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us.
Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,
the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us that we,
being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear,
in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.
By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.

Has anyone asked you THAT QUESTION yet? After all, it's less than four weeks till Christmas! If you haven't heard that question yet, you will soon.

THAT QUESTION is "Are you ready for Christmas?"

What most people mean by that is "Are you finished buying presents?"

Another question that gets asked is, "What do you want for Christmas?"

Knowing what you want is sort of the reverse of having all your shopping done. If you knew what to get everyone on your list, shopping would be quick and easy. It only takes time because you keep looking for just the right present for each person on your list. Asking what people want saves time, energy, and anguish, as well as the very real possibility that you will give someone a gift that they don't want at all.

Those are the two Christmas season questions, then---“Are you ready?” and “What do you want?” Neither one of them is easy to answer.

When someone asks me “Am I ready?”, I think of course not! There are always other things I would like to do----more decorating, more baking, spending more time wrapping presents, spending more time MAKING presents, etc. etc.

I am never really ready for Christmas! But ready or not, it comes!

And what do I **want**?? Well, I always spend so much time trying to figure out what other people want that I have no clue what I want! Maybe all I want for Christmas is for someone else to do the shopping for me!

I have plenty of “stuff”---I don't really need anything.

And besides, most of what I want isn't found in stores.

I want more time, more sleep.

I want people to stop dying of preventable diseases like malaria and tuberculosis. I want cures to be found for all diseases.

I want everybody who wants to work to have jobs. I want everyone who has no home to find a place to live.

I want the world to be a war-free place, I want less tragedy, less suffering, and more joy, more peace, more love, more hope!

But how do I put any of that on my Christmas hint list?

And if I did, who could give it to me?

Over 2000 years ago in Israel, people also longed for the same kinds of things I do. I'm sure they wanted people to live long, healthy lives. I'm sure they wanted an end to suffering and tragedy.

It's part of the human condition that there is war and violence and sickness and suffering.

And the human response to that is to long for peace and love and joy and hope.

When Jesus was born, the Romans ruled Israel. Before Rome, Greece had been in charge. For much of its history, in fact, Israel had been controlled by other countries, every time with a war in between. The notable exception to that were the years when David and then Solomon were the kings of Israel.

And so, the people of Israel prayed for the time when God would put someone from the line of David on the throne. They prayed to be free of Rome or any other source of oppression. They prayed for a time of peace and love and joy and hope.

And God heard their prayers. But the answer was not exactly what they thought it would be or should be.

Instead of a Messiah who would throw the Romans out of Israel, the answer was God incarnate, the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us, Emmanuel- God- with- Us.

The answer was the light of the world, Jesus Christ.

The prophet Isaiah foretold it in our first scripture lesson this morning, saying that all people would come to the mountain where God lives, that God's justice would be established, and that peace would prevail---peace on earth, good will toward all people. The passage ends saying,

“Come, let us walk
in the light of the LORD!”

And according to Luke, John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, said the same thing in somewhat different words----

“By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

The light of the Lord, the dawn from on high will give light to us and guide us in the way of peace. These are words that announce that Jesus Christ, the light of the world, is coming.

Light. Leading to peace.

Sent in love, greeted with joy.

Believing all of this gives us hope, not only hope for the future, but for our own time as well.

Peace, love, joy, hope.

Isaiah and Zechariah spoke to the people of their own time, but they also spoke to the people who would read and hear their words in the future. The people of Jesus' day, including Zechariah, would have heard the message of Isaiah speaking to them, touching their hearts, even over seven centuries after Isaiah first spoke them.

We still read Isaiah's words with great emotion today, over 2700 years later, and some of us know them by heart---

“they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning-hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.”

This vision captures our imagination, and why? Because it is an image that gives us great hope. That someday there will be no more war, that all the world will be at peace, is something we hope and pray for.

The entire passage from Isaiah that we heard today is such a hopeful image! All the people of the world streaming up the mountain where God lives, in a time where God's justice prevails and there is peace, everyone walking together in the light of the Lord up that holy mountain!

What an amazing, beautiful, HOPEFUL image!

We long for the day when it is reality!

Zechariah's words also paint a picture that means HOPE to us! Imagine it! The light of dawn finally comes over the horizon, shining on us, the people who walk in darkness and live in the shadow of death----the light of God shines on us, and it guides our feet in the path of peace!

I find myself breathing a deep sigh when I picture this! A time when there is no more war, and the darkness of this world where there is suffering and death is finally transformed by the light of Christ the Lord!

Christ, the light of the world, is also the hope of the world.

Without the light of Christ, we would still be the people who walk in darkness. **With** the light of Christ, we are the people who have seen a great light, the people whose feet are guided in the way of peace.

There is a hymn in our hymnal, #178, called Hope of the World. Yesterday as I was listening to people decorate the church and working on this sermon, the words of this hymn popped into my head and would not go away.

Somehow I think the Holy Spirit was trying to tell me something. You can open your hymnals if you want, to #178. Or you can just listen as I read them---these words were written by Georgia Harkness, one of the great theologians of the 20th century. She wrote them in 1954, but they are still timely today.

The first verse names Christ as the hope of the world. The second verse points to Christ as the way to end conflict and violence. The third verse emphasizes my point this morning. Professor Harkness wrote---

Hope of the world, afoot on dusty highways,
Showing to wandering souls the path of light,
Walk thou beside us lest the tempting byways
Lure us away from thee to endless night.

Are you ready for Christmas? Are you walking away into
endless night? Or do you see the path of light, the way that the
light of the world is showing you?

Are you ready for Christmas? Are you busy reading the
sales flyers and catalogs until all you can see in your imagination
are piles of toys and clothes and electronics? Or do you see all
people coming together on God's holy mountain?

Are you ready for Christmas? Are you listening to harsh, divisive, angry words and buying into conspiracy theories? Or are you allowing Christ to guide your feet on the path of peace?

Are you ready for Christmas? Are you thinking of life as a competition where you must win at all costs, where you want to knock down the person trying to buy the last Black Friday special so you can get it yourself? Or are you trying to build relationships, grow in love and faith, asking for and receiving forgiveness and mercy?

Are you ready for Christmas? Are you following the Demon called Greed and Suspicion, or are you following the Hope of the World?

Christ came to us on Christmas because he loves us, came to bring us hope and lead us in the way that leads to peace. This is reason for great joy! If we put that first in our hearts, we will respond to God's gift from highest heaven, the bread of life, the light of the world with overflowing joy!

And we will not only have everything we want for Christmas, we will know that it's what everyone else wants, too. And we will be ready for Christmas!

Amen.