

Hope

Each year we move through this time of preparation by noting themes represented as candles on the Advent wreath—like much of God’s reaching out to us—these themes speak of important aspects of our faith which are symbolized by concrete items from God’s creation. Our sacraments use bread, grape and water to convey God’s grace. Here the candles represent the light that God seeks to shine into the darkness of our lives and ways. The wreath itself into which the candles are placed is the symbol of the eternal, everlasting promises God has made to us. Throughout the long history of humankind there have always been present two visions of the world, two ways of interacting with God and each other. Both of the testaments we have received illustrate God’s steadfast love and our stubborn wayward ways. In fact, the earliest records of those first post-resurrection believers reveal they first called themselves followers of The Way. They were followers before and during the time our gospel accounts were recorded. Their records indicate a close association with teachings written down in the first psalm found in our book of psalms—given the subtitle of “Two Ways”. The realities of history show that the way most often chosen by us is not the one lifted up in our scriptures or in Christ’s teachings. The passage we have before us today from the Hebrew Scriptures describes what would come if that way, the way of the Lord, was actually the one which governed our lives and our world. When Isaiah conveys his message from God, he does it by telling of a vision which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem...a vision speaking not of the present in which he lived, but of a time to come. Walter Brueggemann often speaks of prophetic vision as how God speaks to us of the reality which can and is present among us, if we just seek to find where and how God is present. The text is Isaiah’s vision describing the future of Judah and Jerusalem when God’s reign is fully present with them, when Jerusalem’s reality is home to God’s presence and God’s word draws all nations and peoples together to learn God’s ways. When all learn God’s ways, then the vision will be reality and “swords shall be beaten into plowshares, spears into pruning hooks, nation shall not lift sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.” Those hearing of this vision would not have seen any way this could be...they were being besieged by the Assyrians. Judah and Jerusalem would fall and exile would become their reality. In proclamations before this vision, Isaiah brings a word of judgement on how they have failed in their commitment to living God’s ways; Jerusalem’s residents are accused of murder, rebellion, injustice and corruption; they have forsaken God’s ways. The words of judgement are not given in contradiction to the promise found in Isaiah’s vision, but are, in fact, in service of it. In this text, promise and judgment are not contradictory realities: judgement serves promise, and contributes to bringing about the fulfillment of promise. The city of God will one day be transformed from alloy to pure metal becoming a holy and magnificent magnet for the nations after the coming season of judgment and refinement. The promises found in Isaiah’s vision are utterly absurd when examined against Israel’s ancient history; nations have never streamed into Jerusalem to learn and live the divine teaching. God has yet to play the role of international conflict mediator, and the waging of warfare continues to afflict creation and peoples to this very day. War isn’t waged only with bullets and bombs, though that is certainly prevalent in the news these days. War is also personal with a different arsenal of weapons. Our words. Our lack of words. Even our absence. War isn’t always caused by being there; sometimes it’s about not being there. But whether we wage war with bullets or

words, it is a skill that must be learned. Isaiah says as much. We must study it extensively and practice it rigorously. The only way for us to move away from waging war is to practice peace more extensively and more vigorously than we do war...to practice the art of love and caring for others extensively and vigorously. If war is hard to master, why should peace be any easier? We have to be taught and teach the ways of peace and like any acquired skill, we have to practice them over and over again to get really good. To refrain from the angry retort. To offer empathy. To listen well to others. To have time and caring to offer. When working in a research laboratory, I knew biological interactions and was familiar with how to culture cells, design experiments and analyze results. Now, I can't remember the steps of set up or harvesting of cell cultures. I haven't used those skills for 35 years. Why do we think it would be easier for us to remember the ways of peace when we don't practice and use them daily? When we come into God's presence and review the grand tapestry of God's mercy throughout history, we cannot help but notice its totality; no trouble is beyond the reach of God's mercy, no quarrel beyond God's reconciliation, no abandonment renders us so helpless that God cannot help. If we studied those truths more fervently our lives would be very different. Found within the pronouncement of judgement is always a call for repentance; the promise that grace abounds so that Isaiah can see the vision he describes as a real promise about life to come. In the days to come, says Isaiah, signaling to us that however attractive the promise of that vision of no more war sounds, it is not one we can usher in in our time or in our own way. When and how it comes is God's business-though this does not at all mean that the word and vision have no meaning for present hearers. According to Isaiah's vision, the nations do not come streaming in defeated, but positively and voluntarily in order to learn God's ways, walk in God's paths, study the teachings and hear the word of the Lord. It is that turning to the ways of God that will motivate the destruction of the implements of war and the rejection of war itself. Isaiah knows that this kingdom to come is not up to him to construct, but he is clear about how his audience should be living in the meantime. Isaiah's vision ends with the call for his hearers to walk in the light of the Lord. Light is what makes it possible to follow a path. Light is life, goodness, joy, revelation and truth. It is linked with justice and righteousness and the promise of redemption and healing. What a simple seeming summons: let us walk in the light of the Lord, in the path of God's instruction. But it is not easy. It demands trust from God's people, for them to be led by teaching and walking on the path revealed by truth. It demands fear must be put aside as they call to one another to be transformed in the practices of obedience and justice. The current trend of our times is to make Jesus and God our friend, a nice guy. To domesticate God and the themes of judgement found in scripture. Yet scriptures tell us there is a coming judgment. As foreign, or as frightening as the coming judgment of the Son of God might appear, it is an inescapable element of the biblical witness. And for a very good reason. The flip side of judgment is justice...and God while is merciful, God is also just. The dominant rationale for judgement in the Hebrew Scriptures, Gospels and Epistles is how well we treat one another and especially those who are most vulnerable. If you ignore God's coming judgement you also abandon any meaningful sense of God's justice, of God's determination to hold us accountable for how we treat each other and creation. All of scripture remains clear: Christ will come again, as the ancient creed declares: to judge the quick and the dead. So we begin this season of Advent looking ahead, not back. We begin with texts that speak of God's reign fulfilled and with the reminder that there will be a time of judgement so we need to be aware,

to be awake...we need to see the vision of Isaiah as fulfillment of God's promise, and to accept that the vision which will come to pass in God's own time not ours. That the promise is sure then also contains a warning about how we are now living. In our gospel text from Matthew we have Jesus speaking about that time when judgment will arrive for all. He emphasizes that it will come unexpectedly. The foundation among all the apocalyptic images is confirmation that the time will come, that time God promises to come and judge and bring all creation into the fulfilled reign envisioned. Despite the dire warnings contained in these chapters of Matthew reminiscent of Noah and the flood, the fundamental thrust of the passage is that confirmation that although the timing is not known, the event is certain. This element of uncertainty in life, the unexpectedness of events both good and bad, joyful and sorrowful, is not something that we like. But much of life is like that. And we know this and try to protect ourselves against things we cannot control. We know life is precarious, unpredictable, and for these reasons also precious, but we often deny or are afraid to speak of that truth. God's promise does not insulate us from an uncertain future, but promises we are never alone. However, we as human beings do not deal well with uncertainty, we do not like waiting...and when as time passed after Christ's ascension and the Parousia has not happened, our certainty seems to faded. We find it easier to believe it will not happen, at least not during our lifetime. The urging to be awake and be prepared for something we no longer exactly expect seems difficult. That urging to be alert and awake loses its impact. The Matthew passage is concerned about this human tendency to ignore what does not seem imminent; to focus on the past and not the certain coming which has no definite timeline for which to prepare. We live in what is called the in-between time, the meantime between Jesus' birth and Christ's return, the time which Jesus said we needed to be living obediently, faithfully so we would indeed be prepared for that promised event. Christ and the prophets have given us guidance for preparation, Christ provides the light for the path we need to follow the teachings he left us, and the certainty of his return which gives us the hope to step out boldly on the path leading to Isaiah's vision. So rather than thinking about Isaiah's vision as happening in some future time, we could imagine this as a vision always available to those whose eyes have been opened to this as God's reality. You can always go to this home, if you can see it, envision it...and in the power of the Holy Spirit you can for God is present with us...These visions are not merely future hopes and dreams, they represent present potential realities which we can live into; glimpses of that future reign found in God's presence among us now. A modern day prophet, Martin Luther King, envisioned a world without racism...without poverty...a drawing closer of God's reign. His vision captured the imaginations of many...and led to that vision coming closer. In all ways, we have been given what we need to be prepared, to seek and live in God's presence now. In all ways we have been given ways to live into God's vision for us, the hope and assurance that trust in God's promise will be fulfilled in God's own time as we seek glimpses of it among us even now. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.