

## IN THE STILLNESS, WE HOPE

Advent 1 | Matthew 24:36-44; Isaiah 2:1-5

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Advent is here once again. Just as we are ready to create one last dish with our turkey leftovers, we begin the cycle of the story of our faith life one more time. Each year we await with hope the birth of new life among us. Then we follow the story through the life of Jesus, through his ministry, his death and resurrection. But how do we, as people of faith, continue to practice “waiting” year after year? We already know how the story ends, right? What new spiritual truth can be gleaned? Advent provides an invitation to go deeper, to be more awakened and to participate in the unfolding of Spirit in our lives and in our world... with hope and expectancy.

Famed theologian and author Frederick Buechner gives these two poetic analogies which describe the feeling of Advent in his book, *Whistling in the Dark*.

*The house lights go off and the footlights come on. Even the chattiest stop chattering as they wait in darkness for the curtain to rise. In the orchestra pit, the violin bows are poised. The conductor has raised his baton. In the silence of a midwinter dusk there is far off in the deeps of it somewhere a sound so faint that for all you can tell it may be only the sound of the silence itself. You hold your breath to listen. The extraordinary thing that is about to happen is matched only by the extraordinary moment just before it happens.*

*Advent is the name of that moment.*

Ah, but that space...if extended for any length of time, that space can be so uncomfortable can't it? Living in a state of waiting without filling it up. We've been told that nature abhors a vacuum. Unfilled spaces go against the laws of nature and physics. And so, the discipline required to counteract the pull of everything both inside and outside of us which wants to fill that space...invites us into the classroom of opportunities for spiritual growth.

Retailers know how difficult it is to wait...and they capitalize on that yearning by moving up Christmas sales earlier and earlier. Why wait, when you can buy now?

But this season calls us to put aside that impulse...even that strong drive within to fill the void with something...anything, and to wait. To wait with hope for what is to come. This is not a waiting which means doing nothing...it asks us to maintain a space of expectancy, filled with dynamic tension, of readiness...to take right action. But to experience the fullness of this time, you have to be alert and awake to God's presence and movement...

The pause to which we are called during this season allows us to refocus our lives. Our Advent candles themes give us a start: hope, peace, joy and love.

Today is hope. For what do we hope?

Our lectionary texts for the next weeks will take us through the vision of the future of what God's reign can and will look like. But God's reign is not only in the next life. Christian theology teaches us that it is right here on earth as well, and we have a part in making that reign come to earth in the here and now. It's the idea of the tension of the already and the not yet. It requires the work of justice and reconciliation while waiting and being patient for the full redemption of the world—in the not yet.

Rev. Dr. Susan DeGeorge reminded us in her last Bible study series on God's relationship to the environment and earth, that when it comes to the rapture, to which our Gospel lesson refers...you don't want to be the one taken up, because God's reign will come here on earth! We want to be here to live in that reality!

Our texts from the prophesy of Isaiah, give us a vision of those things for which we hope and for which we can work right now. The vision of the already and the not yet.

Isaiah uses the image and location of a mountain. That's no accident. What Isaiah saw in his vision was "the mountain of the Lord's temple... established as chief among the mountains... raised above the hills..." In historical context, this is a reference to Mount Zion on which the temple was built, and therefore the place where the children of Israel believed God physically dwelled in Israel's history. That temple would soon be destroyed and Mt. Zion covered with its rubble, a pile of ruins. But God shows Isaiah that sometime in the future, God will raise up that temple and the mountain on which it stands, and "all nations will stream to it."

That prophecy has been the subject of huge dispute throughout the history of Christendom. Literalists take it as a prophecy that will be physically fulfilled in the last days during the millennium in Israel. Other Christians believe that this prophecy has been spiritually fulfilled by the church as it preached the gospel to all nations who streamed into the church following Christ.

Still others think this prophecy has been fulfilled by Christ himself, who claimed to be the new Temple that would be destroyed and rebuilt in three days (Matthew 26:61) (his death and resurrection). Jesus was the person, not the place, in whom God dwelled in grace and truth (John 1). And Jesus frequently is found in his ministry on mountain tops when he is teaching.

However we take the "mountain" part of this prophecy, the "all nations" part is remarkable. The rest of Isaiah will be filled with pronouncements of judgment on all the nations around Israel. But here, people from every nation invite each other to join the pilgrimage to the place where the God of Israel dwells.

This hopeful vision is of a future of peace (next week's word). Just imagine what the world would look like if nations all came together in understanding and lived together in harmony?

In my preparation for this sermon, I was fascinated to learn that across the street from the United Nations on a stone monument, the words of Isaiah 2:4 are engraved: ***They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; Nation shall not lift up sword against nation neither shall they learn war any more.*** It sits in a small municipal park, Ralph Bunche park, named for the first African American to win the Nobel Peace prize.

On the grounds of the United Nations in the north garden area, the Isaiah 2 theme continues. There is a sculpture entitled, "Let us Beat Swords into Plowshares." The work, by Evgeniy Vuchetich was a gift from the then Soviet Union, presented on December 4, 1959. The bronze statue represents the figure of a man holding a hammer in one hand, and in the other, a sword which he is making into a plowshare, symbolizing humanity's desire to put an end to war and convert the means of destruction into creative tools for the benefit of all humankind. Imagine that...a statue, presented by an enemy combatant focusing on a scripture about peace.

Hope abounds.

But it doesn't end there. INSIDE of the United Nations, it was Dag Hammarskjöld, a man deeply guided by Spirit, who knew that silence and space were needed for people to imagine with hope and to work for peace. And so, in 1957, he designed the Meditation Room, at the very center of the UN building, saying "We want to bring back, in this room, the stillness which we have lost in our streets, and in our conference rooms, and to bring it back in

a setting in which no noise would impinge on our imagination." In the center of that room, sits a large black iron block.

Here are some of the words Hammarskjöld wrote for those visiting the room; and it has everything to do with this season of Advent and the hope for God's reign which lights our way:

***"We all have within us a center of stillness surrounded by silence.***

***This house, dedicated to work and debate in the service of peace, should have one room dedicated to silence in the outward sense and stillness in the inner sense.***

***It has been the aim to create in this small room a place where the doors may be open to the infinite lands of thought and prayer.***

***People of many faiths will meet here, and for that reason none of the symbols to which we are accustomed in our meditation could be used.***

***However, there are simple things which speak to us all with the same language. We have sought for such things and we believe that we have found them in the shaft of light striking the shimmering surface of solid rock.***

***So, in the middle of the room we see a symbol of how, daily, the light of the skies gives life to the earth on which we stand, a symbol to many of us of how the light of the spirit gives life to matter.***

***But the stone in the middle of the room has more to tell us. We may see it as an altar, empty not because there is no God, not because it is an altar to an unknown god, but because it is dedicated to the God whom man worships under many names and in many forms.***

***The stone in the middle of the room reminds us also of the firm and permanent in a world of movement and change. The block of iron ore has the weight and solidity of the everlasting. It is a reminder of that cornerstone of endurance and faith on which all human endeavor must be based.***

***The material of the stone leads our thoughts to the necessity for choice between destruction and construction, between war and peace. Of iron man has forged his swords, of iron he has also made his ploughshares. Of iron he has constructed tanks, but of iron he has likewise built homes for man. The block of iron ore is part of the wealth we have inherited on this earth of ours. How are we to use it?***

***The shaft of light strikes the stone in a room of utter simplicity. There are no other symbols, there is nothing to distract our attention or to break in on the stillness within ourselves. When our eyes travel from these symbols to the front wall, they meet a simple pattern opening up the room to the harmony, freedom and balance of space.***

***There is an ancient saying that the sense of a vessel is not in its shell but in the void. So it is with this room. It is for those who come here to fill the void with what they find in their center of stillness."***

This is a season which calls us to inner and outer stillness as we wait for God; it calls us to be patient as we wait; In that stillness, we have the opportunity to hope and dream for the vision to which our God has called us. In that stillness is the mystery of faith which will unfold and nudge us forward to be bearers of light and bringers of the peace which passes all understanding.

May it be so. Alleluia Amen!