

First Sunday in Advent, Year A  
**Get Ready!**  
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**Isaiah 2:1-5, Matthew 24:36-44**  
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Everything looks different here today. The garlands of greenery and the twinkling lights have come out. Our Advent wreath signals a change in the seasons. As we lit the first Advent candle we began the countdown to Christmas. For Christians, this begins our New Year's celebration. This Sunday we begin to retell our Christian story, the good news of God's special relationship with humanity brought to fullness in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

But ours is not the only story out there right now. Our special Christian holiday to celebrate the miracle of God's coming among humankind is easily overshadowed by our culture's generic winter festival. In the "virtual reality" of our malls and our web sites, Christmas has been here for several weeks. Bright colored Christmas lights are all over the city.

Even the rich music of our unique story has been coopted. Secular songs about sleigh bells and reindeer – intermingled with beloved Christmas carols that tell our story – are everywhere. This year Black Friday, the premier Christmas shopping day, arrived on Thanksgiving! You really have to listen carefully to catch the message of our celebration. Again this year our national orgy of affluence has lost a little of its driving energy as our economy has continued to falter, and many people simply have less money to play with than other years.

Tougher times could turn out to be a blessing. Maybe we have a slightly better chance to get our message out. Because our message is hope, and hope rings stronger in the face of anxiety. And there is lots of that "out there" right now. Our story narrates a stunning miracle that changed the course of history. God chose to come and live in the human world. God chose to reach out to humanity, with all of our problems. Notice that the initiative came from God, not from any of us, not even the most worthy, the most dedicated servants, the most theologically correct, the most biblically literate. We all stand in equal need of God's life changing love.

But we have a credibility problem because God's story is so out of step with our culture's mantra, which goes more like this. The world is here for the taking. We can have what we want, and we deserve it. Just go buy it. If we don't have the cash, we can use a credit card! Our story is completely different. So, we need a special

season just to help us prepare our culture-drugged minds for the real Christmas story.

From the Old Testament, the Hebrew scriptures, we know our faith story began long before Jesus' birth. God's chosen people were pregnant for centuries with the promise that God would come. Humanity had to wait a long time for God to send the Son. At times the hope of God's deliverance seemed impossibly distant. Lifetimes away. That's why we take a few weeks to wait – as our spiritual foreparents waited for centuries – for God's salvation to appear.

Think of Advent as the pregnancy, very short in human terms, when we get ready to welcome God's promised one, who comes – again. These four weeks are here as a gift, a special grace. Carefully selected readings from prophecy and gospel create a lens that prepares us to see and recognize God's surprising choice to bring salvation to God's beloved world. Not as a warrior chief marching down out of the heavens. A poor child of an unwed mother.

It was so easy for the world to miss his unlikely arrival as a poor child, and soon, a refugee. But God's ways are not our ways. Who could guess that God's Messiah would be hidden in plain sight, among farm animals – and attended by poor shepherds. Those given the vision to see the miraculous in this ordinary event learn, not simply that a child has come, but that God has come. And that God will come again among humans, and things will change.

The way of God's coming among humankind is always unexpected, and hidden from the eyes of many. The lessons for today make that clear. Matthew reports that Jesus told his followers that no one will know the day or the hour when God will come, not even the Son. Our challenge is to be awake, watchful, prepared for the coming we can never foresee. That means we need to learn to be attentive to the signs around us, especially on the margins of life, or we might simply miss God's next initiative.

First Isaiah was a holy man of extraordinary wisdom and vision who lived in the southern kingdom of Judah. His land was in great turmoil, trying to hang on to its identity by forging an alliance with Assyria against the northern kingdom of Israel and its powerful ally, Syria. Isaiah was able to look at this struggle, and to see more deeply than his countrymen, or their leaders.

At least as important, he crafted verbal images with the power to carry his vision to his own people, to dispel the blindness that kept them locked in fear and hopelessness. Speaking into the political chaos and international maneuvering of his

time, he predicted a new time when God would recreate human society. His words, in English translation, still provide images for transformation that speak powerfully in our time. Of that new time he wrote,

**“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.”**

These words are so familiar 2700 years later, that we hear them, and hardly notice the stunning vision of change that formed them.

Have you really caught the nature of the transformation they foretell? God would create a peacetime economy. Weapons would not lie silent. They would be re-manufactured into implements that nurture life. Isaiah offered a vision of a society where none are hungry and homeless, because the weapons of war have been re-formed into implements of peace and hope.

Swords have become plowshares, primitive tools fashioned from forked boughs with a sharp piece of metal attached. These break the heavy soil and prepare fields for crops that feed hungry people. Spears have been re-fashioned into pruning hooks, which trim grapevines and fruit trees each spring and provide a living for the simplest workers. In God’s realm they do not need to learn war anymore, because the hungry are fed, the blind see, the captive is set free.

But there is another way for us to hear this powerful prophesy. These words can help us get ready for God’s transformation. They have remarkable power to help us see ourselves, our time, and the promise of our future, through eyes healed from the blindness of our culture. Just for a week I invite you to begin each day reading Isaiah’s words from chapter 2:1-5. Let their vision be the lens through which you view our world. If we do this, we might notice different stories, stories that carry signs of God’s Advent, God’s coming. Now.

- Instead of terrorist killings and dubious weapons inspections we might find stories that tell us when and where the hungry are being fed. And how we can help.
- We might look among ourselves for leaders who put their energy and their resources into caring for all the people, especially the sick, the suffering, and the homeless.
- We might catch opportunities to help – even a little – by supporting entrepreneurs from poor countries. For several years Jan and I have supported a program called Kiva that lends funds to individual entrepreneurs around the world, especially women, who could never qualify for loans from conventional lenders.

Unless we are awake and watchful, we will miss those stories. Stories of war, and rumors of war, are more dramatic. They get our adrenalin flowing as they flash insistently across our computer and i-pad screens. They sell newspapers and TV air time. Too often, they distract us from these less visible stories, and we miss more than a moment of gratitude and joy.

We miss an invitation. God's advent is small and on the edges of our lives. But it grows as God's people hear God's voice and join the work. Some of us volunteer at the Salvation Army. Our food drives and our Christmas gift collection of toys and clothing show God's love. Our Christmas Joy offering aids retired clergy, their widowed spouses, and minority students.

But today is only the first Sunday in Advent, we have a journey still ahead of us. In the narthex is a wide variety of advent devotional booklets to guide us through this season. Mary's pregnancy has to come to term. She has not yet begun her journey to Bethlehem. In Advent we watch the signs. Like the central focus for our worship, the table where God feeds us. And in front of it, your lovely traditional Celtic cross. If the cross were more plain and stark, perhaps its message would be even clearer. The victim of violence has become the welcoming host.

This table displays the promise of Advent. God has come among us. The feast of hope is before us. The plowshare has tilled the soil. Wheat has been planted, harvested, ground, and baked. The pruning hook has trimmed the vines. The fruit is gathered. Faithful disciples are nourished here by Jesus, the living bread, the true vine. No, the transformation is not yet complete. None of us may see its completion in our lifetime. But the promise restores our hope.

That is why many name the first Advent candle, the candle of hope. The crucified teacher is the risen Christ. That is our good news – news so powerful that it will change everything. News so exciting that we cannot contain it. It must be shared. We must invite others to join us here. Will you take that on as a task for Advent, to share our news, to invite someone to share our hope? Take a moment to think seriously whom you might invite. A friend? A neighbor? A family member? Someone who used to come? But don't *just* think about it. Don't let your shyness hold you back. Do it. It is important. God's world is at stake! This time needs vision and hope as much as any in history. And we have it – **TO SHARE!** Thanks be to God! Amen.