

ADVENT IN ISAIAH: 1. JUDGMENT

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Isaiah 2:1-5

Today is the first Sunday of the season of Advent. It is the beginning of the church year. (Happy new year!) Today marks a new turn of our liturgical calendar.

The word Advent is from the Latin *adventus* which means coming, arrival. Theologically, Advent is a time of preparation—preparing for Christmas. We also view it has a time of waiting and anticipation. So, the question is, what are we preparing for? The obvious answer is that we are preparing for Christmas which celebrates the birth of Jesus the Christ.

However, the discerning among you might say, “Hey, wasn't Christ born 2000 years ago? What are we preparing for?” And that is a good question. What exactly are we still preparing for? Well, to be honest, we haven't yet gotten it right, just yet. And at no point have we ever been fully prepared. We'll talk more about that in a moment.

Today, I am starting a four-week sermon series for Advent called Advent in Isaiah. If, in these weeks before Christmas, you are hoping for sermons about angels and shepherds and mangers, then I must apologize. You won't find those things in this sermon series. Instead, I am going to be looking at the Old Testament prophecy of Isaiah and his words on how we might best prepare ourselves for Christmas.

Isaiah was a prophet in Jerusalem. He lived in the 8th and 7th centuries BC. He is the author of the Old Testament book that bears his name.

Our reading for today is from the second chapter of this book. And it offers us that wonderful description of the weapons of war being repurposed into tools of agriculture: *They shall beat their swords in to plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks.* But before we dig any deeper into our reading, it is crucial that we consider its context, because context is everything.

At the time that Isaiah was serving God as a prophet, his world was in turmoil. 200 years earlier, the great Kingdom of Israel had split into two nations—Israel and Judah. And in that time, the Assyrian empire had marched on and obliterated the Kingdom of Israel. Israel—the northern Kingdom—ceased to exist. Many of its people south to Judah.

Now, the Judah—the Southern Kingdom—is facing the same threat from the Assyrians. Isaiah interprets the fate of his people as a result of their sin, of their turning from God. Isaiah cites God saying, *Your country lies desolate, your cities are*

burned with fire; in your very presence aliens devour your land. This is the grim reality that Isaiah and his people live in. He concludes the first chapter with these words, *For you shall be like an oak whose leaf withers, and like a garden without water. The strong shall become like tinder, and their work like a spark; they and their work shall burn together, with no one to quench them.* According to the prophet, this will be Judah's fate—it will burn and there will be no one to help them.

But then, in chapter 2—in today's reading—the tone shifts. This chapter begins, *The word that Isaiah son of Amos saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.* This is the title of this passage. And notice the word saw. How did Isaiah receive God's word? He didn't hear it; he saw it. He saw God's vision and God's promise. The vision goes like this: *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.*

The mountain of the Lord's house is, of course, the temple mount in Jerusalem. In reality, it is definitely not the highest mountain around. So, what we immediately realize is that this must be an alternative reality. This is God's word that Isaiah has seen with God's throne and God's home looking over the world. And God's home doesn't just sit there. No. We are told that the *nations stream to it.* Again, that is not the reality experienced by the Judeans. Jerusalem was currently no one's destination. No one was streaming there.

But now, in this alt reality vision, people from across the world are calling to one another and saying, *Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord.* And why do they wish to go there, to go to this temple? Simple. They want to learn from the Lord. They want God to teach them God's ways so that they may walk in God's paths. This holy place will be a fountainhead of God's commandments. This is the vision of a counter-reality where all people hunger for God's word.

And in this alt-reality, not only do the people learn about God, but God judges them. As Isaiah tells us, in this new reality, *God shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples.*

When we think of judges and judging, we tend to think about punishment, don't we. We've all watched far too many TV crime dramas. We know that in the end, the judge will rule and the guilty will go to jail. And so, when we read about God's judgment, we tend to get nervous. We anticipate that we shall be punished.

But I would like to look at this a different way. Maybe the purpose of God's judgment, instead of seeking guilt or innocence, is to reveal the truth.

God is pure. In God there are no lies or deceit. There is no dishonesty or betrayal or fraud or illusion or disguise. God is truth. And the reason that we fear

God is that when we stand in God's presence, everything in us that is impure is exposed. Our lies, our conceits, our duplicities, are brought to the bright light for all—including us—to see. God doesn't need to point at us and declare our guilt; our guilt becomes evident in the pure light of God's truth. As we read in the letter of 1 John: *If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us* (1 John 1:8).

In the first chapter of Isaiah, God declares, *I will turn my hand against you; I will smelt away your dross as with a furnace and remove all your alloy*. This is the smelting process. With the heat of a furnace, the impurities of a metal are separated out leaving only the purest metal.

God's judgment may be painful, but it is not punishment. The purpose of God's judgment is to make us pure, to make us new. It is truly a gift.

And so, in the alternative reality of Isaiah's vision, God judges the nations, and the result is an end to all war and hostilities. However, out in the real word world, the Assyrians are banging at the gates of Judah. But again, back in God's reality, God judges and the nations not only cease their fighting, but their implements of war become obsolete. Swords and spears become tools to grow food and provide nourishment. And as the spiritual puts it, they "ain't gonna study war no more."

I believe that by now you all recognize this alt-reality as being God's kingdom. This is the vision shown to Isaiah, the vision of God's reign—a vision of a time that already exist among us. Yes, the kingdom of God is here. It is among us. Only, our access to it is limited.

Jesus was clear when he proclaimed, *The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand* (Mark 1:15). The Kingdom of God is truly present. I think of it as like being on the other side of a great door. We can't enter through that door, but occasionally that door opens for a moment and offers us a glimpse to the other side. And then the door closes again. But what we have seen inspires us to continue striving for that kingdom.

On Christmas, we celebrate the birth of the Christ child. But that Christ child was also God—Emmanuel, God with us. We believe that Jesus is not only the son of God, but God as well, God who humbled God's-self to be with us, as one of us, to teach us God's way so that we might walk in God's path.

If we believe in Jesus and that God is with us, then we have to believe in God's Kingdom and God's reign. And this brings us back to Advent. Advent is a time that reminds us that we need to prepare ourselves for the reality of God's kingdom. God's kingdom is out there. It is here.

Advent is four weeks that reminds us that we really should spend the entire year, not just the month of December, preparing ourselves for the gift of God's judgment, for it that judgment that will enable us to walk through that door. Every day, every moment, we should strive to rid ourselves of the lies and pretense that define us. We need to humble ourselves to become who God wants us to be.

In this time of Advent, we are invited to prepare not for a baby but for our God, our God who is waiting for us.

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