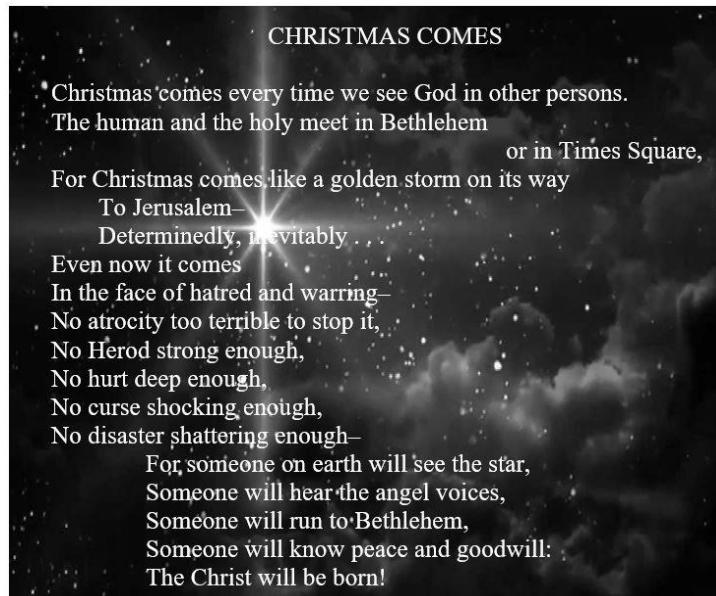


WAITING FOR JESUS



By Ann Weems

Scripture:

Isaiah 2:1-5

¹The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

²In 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. ³Many 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. ⁴He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; 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.

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

Matthew 24:36-44

³⁶"But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³⁷For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, ³⁹and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left (behind). ⁴¹Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴²Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



WAITING FOR JESUS

The Matthew scripture reading is a weird passage for Advent isn't it? This is one of the scriptures that Tim LaHaye used to guide the writing of his series of *Left Behind!* books. Anyone here read them? Do you worry about being left behind? I want to assure you not to worry. But I do believe we will all have a day of judgment.

In his books called *Left Behind* (and then subtitles like *Tribulation Force* and *Soul Harvest*) LaHaye basically tries to scare the dickens out of the reader so we would believe in Jesus or else burn in hell. He wrote sixteen different books on the idea that this scripture warns people that they better be born-again evangelical Christians or they won't get to go to heaven on judgment day. They'll be stuck on earth forever wondering what happened to their friends and family members.

HAROLD CAMPING

Remember Harold Camping who said he knew for sure the Rapture was going to happen September 6, 1994, then May 21, 2011, and then October 21, 2011. There were images of people's clothes on the ground (supposedly showing that people disappeared and left their clothing behind) spoofing these predictions. Camping died in 2013, admitting it was sinful to say he knew when the hour would come.

THE LECTIONARY

When I first saw this scripture in the choices for today I thought, "Really!" They chose this passage for the lectionary reading today, the first Sunday in Advent?? Great!

But if you read this passage carefully, it doesn't say anything about going to heaven, or where they are being taken up to. Tim LaHaye has a big and sadly destructive imagination. In his stories he paints a picture of our God as punishing and mean rather than understanding that people may struggle with faith for various reasons. Tim LaHaye's God is a mean, hateful, no second chances kind of God. A full reading of the main message in the Bible tells us a different story. We are told about a faithful God who is merciful, patient, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love who shows us through the ways of Jesus what God's love looks like.

Our God is a God of second chances! One of the main examples is Jesus on the cross telling the thief who asked for mercy that he will see him in paradise. Even with his last breath, Jesus forgives and spiritually heals someone who had previously mocked him.

THE AMAZING LOVE OF JESUS

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said this about the amazing love of Jesus: "*Jesus Christ lived in the midst of his enemies. At the end most of his disciples deserted him. On the cross he seemed utterly alone, surrounded by evildoers and mockers. For this cause he had come, to bring peace... even to God's enemies.*"

Jesus understood that his disciples were flawed and fragile humans. So he was understanding and forgiving when he allowed doubting Thomas to touch his wounds. He understood they were probably still in shock after the crucifixion, so Jesus forgave them even when they had gone back to fishing.

Our God understands us thoroughly because God made us. God knows how our brains work and how we are a fearful species. We were created with questioning minds. God knows and God understands the pressures we experience and the obstacles that get in the way of having faith. That is why Jesus came to "reconcile" us to God.

We need constant reconciling because it is too easy to imagine God is punishing and unforgiving. We need constant reminders of what God's love looks like in action. That is why we are instructed to keep reading God's words of promise, pray, pray, pray, and remember God's basic message is love.

So what is it about this passage that can be applied to this week of Advent? This week's Gospel reading comes from a long speech, the last one Jesus gave. At the end of it, Jesus describes himself as the Son of Man who will some day return. He explains with unmistakable clarity that when the Son of Man returns, we will be judged.

But when you remember all that Christ emphasized in his ministry, he did not demand people to believe in him. He freely gave of himself for healing and forgiveness, and often in the healing stories he told them they were forgiven before they even asked. He told the woman caught in adultery to go and sin no more, but that was a way to keep her safe as well.

FOLLOWING JESUS

Jesus did not question the people about how often they went to the temple, or threaten that they would be left behind. But he did point out the way to abundant life through imitating himself. He pointed out that following him was as simple as living generously and trusting that God cares for you, and as difficult as giving up your comfy life for others.

In today's passage, Jesus is pointing out the importance of tending to the hungry, the thirsty, the disabled, the lonely, the stranger, the addicted, the sick, and the imprisoned. How do we know that? Because the next _eriscope (scripture passage) starting with verse 45 describes the faithful as those who feed the hungry and help those in need.

Jesus emphasizes not being lazy about caring for others as God would have us do because now, at the end of his ministry, this is his main focus. Jesus is sick and tired of the Pharisees and Sadducees neglecting the poor. He is telling those who lifted themselves up as holier than all the rest, that they would be left behind if they didn't start paying attention to those around them in need and care for them on behalf of God. That is our job today, too, to do the work of God in Jesus' name.

HOW DID YOU DO?

How did you do this past week? Did you open up your Thanksgiving meal to strangers and the needy? Did you pray for them? Both are powerful things to do for those in need.

I am grateful for participating in the Thanksgiving meal we had here inspired by Pamela Sage's care for others. The fishes and the loaves miracle happened again and we had more food than we knew what to do with. But all eighteen in attendance left happy and with our hunger for food and fellowship satisfied. Strangers came, those who had nowhere else to

go, those who were thirsty for friendship; our Bowen Hall door was wide open. It was a foretaste of the banquet waiting for us all in heaven. On Thanksgiving, we were giving and receiving God's blessings.

Reverend Calvin Chinn specializes in helping congregations revitalize. In an article in the *Christian Century* he said that these texts on this first Sunday of Advent intend to wake us up and to disrupt our comfortable, ordinary lives. Matthew reminds us that our current reality, "eating and drinking, and being merry," will not put us on the good side of Christ's final judgment if we neglect those around us while making ourselves happy.

ISAIAH'S PROPHECY

And Isaiah's prophecy that Robert read today is also shockingly bold: "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 is God's word for us on the first Sunday of Advent. Advent signals the hope and possibility of peace with a fresh start. Every year we get to celebrate the Prince of Peace being born for us once again.

Pastor Chinn says: This Advent feels different. It seems as if there are more things to worry about than ever before. Unanswered questions hang over us after the election. How can we have peace when our country is so divided? Will we lose our health insurance? Who will lose their job? What creatures will go extinct? What new environmental disaster will befall all of us due to climate change?

**Whatever our changing world
holds in store for us, the
Word of God remains the same and so
does our resurrection hope.
Thanks to Jesus, hope flows eternal.
If Jesus can defeat death so can we.
Have no fear.**

A ROLE MODEL OF HOPE

One of my favorite fearless role models of hope and trust in God is Reverend Dietrich Bonhoeffer. His writings are in a beautiful book

with worthwhile readings for Advent called *God in the Manger*.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a Lutheran pastor from a well educated upper class German family. Two days after Hitler's election as chancellor in 1933, Bonhoeffer made a radio broadcast criticizing him. Three months later Bonhoeffer also vocally opposed the persecution of Jews, and argued that the Church had a responsibility to act against discrimination. Since the Nazi party had infiltrated the German protestant churches, Bonhoeffer formed what he called "The Confessing Church" which stood in opposition to the Nazi German Christian movement.

Although he was given an opportunity to teach in the United States, Bonhoeffer returned to Germany to protest Hitler's abusive dictatorship, knowing he might be arrested. During his two years in a prison camp, a fellow prisoner described him this way:

"Bonhoeffer was different, just quite calm and normal, seemingly perfectly at his ease in prison... his soul really shone in the dark desperation of our prison. He was one of the very few men I have ever met to whom God was real and ever close to him."

Many of his letters and journal entries from prison are in this book *God in the Manger*. One of his most famous quotes connects directly to our scripture today. He said, "*Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.*"

BEING SILENT IN THE FACE OF EVIL

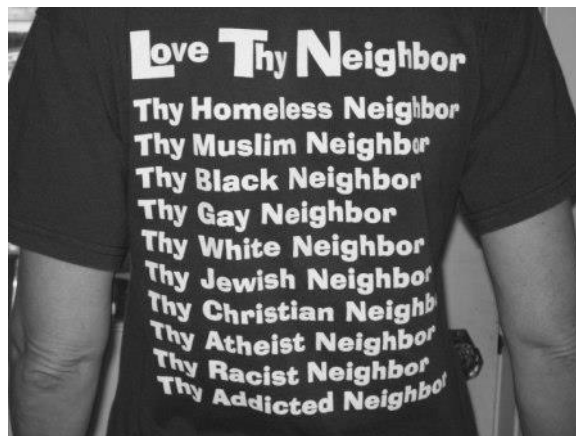
When we let the poor feel hopeless and do not find some space in our lives to lift them up, we are being silent in the face of evil. When we walk past the Boys and Girls Club knowing more than fifty per cent of those children are living in shelters and hotels and cars, and we don't do something about it, not acting is to act

neglectfully. When Muslims and immigrants are abused we must protect them.

When we focus on our own needs over and above the needs of others, we will be left behind when others are reaping the spiritual health benefits that naturally come with a compassionate life of generous giving, protecting and serving.

Pastor Bonhoeffer said, **"Being a Christian is less about cautiously avoiding sin than about courageously and actively doing God's will."**

So let us do God's will and live generously this Advent. Love all others, judge not, be compassionate to those different from you. Faithfully love your neighbor. I have this shirt to help me remember. Amen



Benediction:

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and forever more. Amen



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