

*Before and After*

Isaiah 2:1-5

Whitefish UMC

November 28, 2010—First Sunday of Advent

- † In our neighborhood lives a fellow who puts his Christmas decorations up around the second week of November. Usually it annoys me, but this year I find myself envying him his prescience. Problem is, the new electric countdown clock to Christmas appears to be stuck at 35 days. Perhaps the below-zero temperatures have frozen it in place.
- † We enter Advent this Sunday, a tricky time of year. This Sunday marks a new year in the church's calendar, for Christians believe that time also plays tricks. We live in a time of already but not yet—especially now. We look back and remember the birth of Jesus, God with us, so many centuries ago. And we look forward these next four weeks, to the rebirth of the Christ in our midst.
- † The British poet U. A. Fairhope, the first woman nominated as Professor of Poetry at Oxford University, writes in her poem *BC:AD* of how for her, all time and history are marked by the before and after of the birth of Jesus.
- † This was the moment when Before  
Turned into After, and the future's  
Uninvented timekeepers presented arms.
- † This was the moment when nothing  
Happened. Only dull peace  
Sprawled boringly over the earth.

† This was the moment when even energetic  
Romans  
Could find nothing better to do  
Than counting heads in remote provinces.

† And this was the moment  
When a few farm workers and three  
Members of an obscure Persian sect  
Walked haphazard by starlight straight  
Into the kingdom of heaven.

† It's a beautiful poem and a lovely idea, isn't it? But the cynics among us  
might ask "What difference did it really make? We still have war, hunger,  
natural disaster, violence, and an major economic upheaval. How, then, can  
we wait for Christmas this year with authentic but not false hope?"

† As John Buchanan says, the answer comes from deep in history: centuries  
before the birth of Jesus, a prophet wrote that the day is coming when people  
will stream to the holy mountain of God; the nations will come and the most  
remarkable thing will happen:

† *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 no more.*

† Interesting that the world in which Isaiah lived was a choppy, chaotic,  
unjust, warring world. Israel was a storm-tossed nation, threatened by  
powerful Assyrians to the north and east and menaced by the Egyptians to  
the south and west. The king and his advisors were occupied with what they  
needed to do to protect themselves. Events were getting out of their control.  
Fear ran rampant.

- † Isaiah’s world resembled ours in many ways. For most people, well-being depended on an abundance of possessions. The neediest of the needy, the orphans and the widows, began to sink in the troubled waters of their history. What was worse, many people didn’t seem to care. “It’s always been this way. Nothing will ever change. Nothing I can do about it.”
- † And others focused on building stronger and bigger armadas to fight the mighty armadas of other storm-tossed nations. But out of that turmoil one voice stood out. A voice of God’s vision; a vision of God’s vision. To the world that was warring and killing and groping and sinking in the angry sea, Isaiah rose up and called out his stirring words:
- † *"Look! Focus your eyes upon the mountain of the house of the Lord...there on the shore....For it shall rise up and be established as the highest of the mountains...And people of all races will come and say:  
'Let us make our way together to the mountain of the Lord, that he may teach us his ways, And that we may walk in his paths.'*
- † But was Isaiah just a foolhardy idealist, impractical and delusional? Or, as one writer asks, is it possible that he was the only realist of his age, that his vision penetrated more deeply into the essence of reality?
- † A year or so ago, in our bible study, we read the book of Isaiah. And if you were to ask the people in that bible study if Isaiah was some kind of Pollyanna, you’d get a resounding “NO!” In fact, only about 10% of the book of Isaiah offers promises of hope rather than pessimistic judgment.
- † Yet Isaiah had a vision, a vision of God’s vision. I love what Dr. Stephen Montgomery says about this vision and its timing:
- † “And the thing that separated him from the others was that he actually believed that message from God, that the sickness which overcomes us and draws us toward the myriad of our violent insecurities *must be stopped!*

- † The future of our planet has always depended upon people, at least a remnant of people, fixing their hearts, minds and souls on an alternative vision...on a landmark established by God. And without that vision, the prophet says, the people perish.
- † But there is something else that separated Isaiah from all the others. He wasn't simply pointing to the future. Rather, he was speaking about the present moment!
- † Did you notice how he began this prophecy? "In days to come," reads the NRSV translation. "In days to come..." But the literal Hebrew is a bit more nuanced. "In the back of the days," or better yet, "In the midst of the present." Isaiah is suggesting that the *present* moment is ripe, or to use an appropriate Advent term, *pregnant* with God's presence.
- † I hope this doesn't come as a surprise to any of you who are listening to my voice, he says, but I've never been pregnant. I do, however, remember talking with a pregnant woman not too long ago, and she talked about the first time she felt movement. It was subtle, almost imperceptible. So subtle that she was not entirely sure that she had felt anything. "Was that really movement? Or did I just imagine it?" So she tried to be very still and very quiet so that she might be sensitive to the hidden reality.
- † Maybe the prophet's gift is not to see magically into the future, but to have a spirit which discerns the mystery of the present. That mystery is that our history and our lives are lived against a larger reality. There is more than meets the eye! The day when people "shall beat their swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks" is nearer than we can imagine!
- † Can you believe that? Or is the prophet just a wild-eyed, dreamy, impractical idealist? Jesus surely didn't think so. He staked his very life on it. But that is the question before us this Advent. Can we watch, be ready,

claim this vision, and move towards this vision...*now, in the midst of the present?*

- † There is a tendency to be passive in our waiting. But we are reminded in our text before us today that just the opposite is true...what we do is of eternal weight, and how we live while we wait is a matter of crucial significance.”
- † Daniel Clendenin points us to the tension between the inauguration of God’s kingdom with the birth of Jesus and its culmination in his future coming. He offers a wonderful bit of Advent encouragement with a piece written by the Jesuit priest Daniel Berrigan. It is called *Advent Credo*.
- † It is not true that creation and the human family are doomed to destruction and loss—  
This is true: For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life;
- † It is not true that we must accept inhumanity and discrimination, hunger and poverty, death and destruction—  
This is true: I have come that they may have life, and that abundantly.
- † It is not true that violence and hatred should have the last word, and that war and destruction rule forever—  
This is true: Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, his name shall be called

wonderful councilor, mighty God, the  
Everlasting, the Prince of peace.

† It is not true that we are simply victims of  
the powers of evil who seek to rule the  
world—

This is true: To me is given authority in  
heaven and on earth, and lo I am with you,  
even until the end of the world.

† It is not true that we have to wait for those  
who are specially gifted, who are the  
prophets of the Church before we can be  
peacemakers—

This is true: I will pour out my spirit on all  
flesh and your sons and daughters shall  
prophecy, your young men shall see visions  
and your old men shall have dreams.

† It is not true that our hopes for liberation of  
humankind, of justice, of human dignity of  
peace are not meant for this earth and for  
this history—

This is true: The hour comes, and it is now,  
that the true worshipers shall worship God  
in spirit and in truth.

† So let us enter Advent in hope, even hope  
against hope. Let us see visions of love and  
peace and justice. Let us affirm with

humility, with joy, with faith, with courage:  
Jesus Christ—the life of the world.

† *Amen.*

*Sources:*

*Dr. Stephen Montgomery, “Closer than You Think,”* <http://day1.org>

*Daniel Clendenin,* <http://www.journeywithjesus.net> citing *Daniel Berrigan*

*John Buchanan, “Hope or Humbug?”* <http://fourthchurch.org>