

November 27, 2016
The First Sunday of Advent, Year A, RCL
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St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Isaiah 2:1-5
Psalms 122
Romans 13:11-14
Matthew 24:36-44

In my first two years out of seminary, I worked at The Episcopal Church Center on 2nd Ave. in New York, just a short lunchtime walk to the United Nations Plaza. If you have visited the United Nations you may have seen one of my favorite sculptures, outside the U.N. General Assembly building, that dramatically illustrates today's ancient prophesy from Isaiah. It is an extraordinary many-times life-size bronze sculpture of a muscular man—a Mister Universe kind of muscular man—holding a giant hammer over his head in mid-swing, as he beats a giant sword into a plowshare. At its base, near the man's feet, the tip of the oversized sword has begun to bend into the belly-shape of a plow—an instrument of violence becoming an agricultural tool, used to nourish rather than to kill.

While artistically imposing, the sculpture is also remarkable in that it was made by an artist in the Soviet Union and presented as a gift to the United Nations in the year 1959, three months after then Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's ten-day tour of the United States and his meetings here with President Eisenhower—the first-ever visit to the United States by a Soviet leader after the establishment of US-Soviet relations in 1933.

Isaiah calls us to dream of God's reign, when "...nation shall not lift up sword against nation, [and] neither shall [we] learn war any more." (Is. 2:4b) There is a footnote in *The Jewish Study Bible* that says Isaiah's ancient prophesy still imagines nations with boundaries, but nations whose disputes will one day be arbitrated at the Temple before God, and not with bloodshed.ⁱ

The U.N. "Swords into Plowshares" sculpture combined with the story of how it ended up on a patch of lawn in NYC offer hope for Isaiah's prophesy of God's dream for humanity. In the 67 years since the arrival of that sculpture in New York, we know there have been plenty of tensions between the US and the Soviets, now Russians. (Fidel Castro's death this weekend stirs up memories of the Soviet-backed Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962.) And yet, it is also true that despite the differences between the US and Russia we have shared mutually beneficial alliances and exchanges in culture, athletics, education, science and medicine, space exploration, even travel and tourism, notwithstanding ongoing disagreements, competition, and a lingering absence of complete trust in one another.ⁱⁱ

Today, perhaps more than ever, we need to embrace difference rather than letting difference lead to alienation and destruction. The world in which we find ourselves on any given day does not have to be our ultimate destiny. That is what the prophets are trying to tell us: we have it within ourselves to learn a new way of being in the world; "'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that [God] may teach us [God's] ways and that we may walk in [God's] paths.'" (Is. 2:3)

And, it's not just about nation against nation. In his sermon last Sunday at our diocesan convention in Hartford, Presiding Bishop Michael Curry spoke of having witnessed the devastating aftermath of civil war in Burundi, reminding us that conflict within a nation can be just as (or even more) destructive. Let us remember and learn from our own Civil War history. Within this nation, it is time for us all to put down the swords and to work together to feed, and clothe, and educate, and insure, to protect, to defend, to befriend, and to offer safety, fairness, justice, and forgiveness to one another. "'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD...that [God] may teach us [God's] ways and that we may walk in [God's] paths.'"

Today, we begin a new church year with this purple season of Advent, named for the Latin verb, *adventus*, meaning "to come," as in the coming of Christ. Advent is the season that anticipates both the celebration of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth and the promised return of a risen Christ to usher in God's ultimate reign. "For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem." (Is. 2:3b) Jesus, in his earthly lifetime, exemplified those words of Isaiah, to "teach us [God's] ways...that we may walk in [God's] paths." Advent marks the end of an old era and beginning of something new. Change is coming, but when?

That was the disciples' question. In Matthew 24, Jesus has recently made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem; he has just left the Temple following a lot of banter, stirring up Sadducees and Pharisees—challenging their legalistic interpretation of God's ways. Jesus has made his way back up to the Mount of Olives that looks west, across to the Temple Mount, and the disciples have sought him out in private to ask about the timing of his predicted end-of-the-age when he says, the stones of the Temple will be thrown down.

The short answer to the disciples' question is, "...about that day and hour no one knows...you...must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour," Jesus answers. (Mt. 24:44).

The author Alexander Shaia is both a Spiritual Director and a psychotherapist who founded a spiritual retreat center in Santa Fe, New Mexico. In his book, *The Hidden Power of the Gospels*, Shaia sees each of the four Gospels as addressing a different question. He says Matthew asks, "How do we move through change?"ⁱⁱⁱ Change is coming. We are waiting.

As it turns out for the disciples in today's reading, the end of the age as they knew it was just hours away—the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of their teacher. A few days of shock, terror, and disbelief would be followed by the unimaginable—even more astonishing and overwhelming encounters with a resurrected Jesus, transformed into a barely recognizable yet remarkably familiar presence. According to varying accounts of those appearances, the disciples could (and did) touch him, talk with him, eat with him, and finally, watch him ascend into the clouds. Really? Or, Really!

David Bartlett, a beloved (now) retired Yale Divinity School professor used to say there are two camps of Christians when it comes to the notion of the coming of the Son of Man, the return of Christ. Bartlett said, "Some Christians think the whole emphasis on Christ's [return] is much ado about nothing, or at least much ado about nothing *believable*." And, other "Christians think that Christ's second coming is the [very] heart of the Gospel..." He says, that first group of Christians who have trouble believing are "tempted to fall into a state of perpetual apathy." And, those "who are focused on last things [God's judgment] are tempted to fall into a state of perpetual anxiety."^{iv}

In Matthew's Gospel reading today, Jesus steers us away from both apathy and anxiety. Change is coming, he says. And while we are waiting we are called to pay attention, to "Keep awake" because "...about that day and hour no one knows." We are not expected to know everything, but we are expected to do something. A friend of mine has a little lapel pin that says, "Jesus is coming...Look Busy!"

If we read between the lines of the Gospel we can see that there are two kinds of waiting. There is the 'life goes on as usual' kind of waiting—working in the field, grinding at the mill, doing just what we always do—and then there is what we might call purposeful waiting. Purposeful waiting is just that—waiting with purpose, waiting with intention, with meaning—not just toe-tapping, mindless, mechanical waiting around. Purposeful waiting is thoughtful waiting.

During this in-between time of Advent waiting we are called to prepare ourselves for whatever is coming. If we are ready we don't need to be anxious about whatever is coming...who knows when? We need to be ready for the Lord at any time. We need to pay attention to how we are living. As Paul writes to the 1st c. Christians in Rome, "the day is near...let us live honorably..." not behaving badly, "...not in quarreling and jealousy." (Rom. 13:13)

We wait, now, as Mary waited for the birth of her son, back then. Just as Mary would have been very pregnant with some four weeks to go before giving birth, the church, this 21st c. Body of Christ, is very pregnant in anticipation of a new life that we, like Mary, cannot yet fully imagine. Nonetheless, we are called, you and I, into just that re-imagining of the church, now, more than ever before in our lifetimes. As Mary anticipated the birth of her son, we are called to anticipate the birth of a 21st c. Body of Christ. What will this body look like? Will it have all ten fingers and toes? Will we, as the Body of Christ develop, and learn, and grow into maturity? Will our 21st c. Body of Christ be a magnet for new followers who will carry on the cry for (and work for) equality and justice for all people of this and every nation? Will we, as the Body of Christ, heal, and feed, and love unconditionally? Will our Body of Christ—our 21st c. church—make a positive and lasting difference in the world until the ultimate culmination of God's reign that begins in Mary's Jesus? That is up to us, with God's help.

May the Holy One, lead us, together, into purposeful waiting this Advent season. "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD...that [God] may teach us [God's] ways and that we may walk in [God's] paths."^v

ⁱ Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Jewish Study Bible: Jewish Publication Society Tanakh Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 788.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.state.gov/p/eur/ci/rs/200years/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Alexander J. Shaia, *The Hidden Powers of the Gospels* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2010), 24.

^{iv} David Lyon Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting On the Word, Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008-2011), 20.