

December 1, 2019
The First Sunday of Advent, Year A
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Isaiah 2:1-5
Psalm 122
Romans 13:11-14
Matthew 24:36-44

He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
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.¹

About once a month, the New Haven police chief hosts a gathering of New Haven clergy. I went regularly when Anthony Campbell was chief, but let it go while we were sorting out my future here. I finally got back to it the Thursday before Thanksgiving, with new Chief Ontoniel Reyes. As was true in the past, I was the only white congregational pastor present. That's one of the reasons I think it's important to show up. Among the twelve or fifteen clerics in attendance, only two others were white: a state police chaplain I had never met before, and retired Episcopal Diocese of Connecticut Bishop Jim Curry.

Jim was there to talk about his work with a group called Weapons Into Plowshares. Jim retired a few years ago. On retirement, he and his wife chose to move to the Fairhaven neighborhood of New Haven, where they attend St. James Episcopal Church. Jim told me he is glad in retirement to have time for the work he chooses. His primary focus is Weapons Into Plowshares, a group that literally turns guns into gardening tools. They work with the New Haven Police Department, which supplies them with guns that have been turned in and disabled. They've acquired a portable forge that use for demonstrations in the community. Apply enough heat and muscle and, voila, a gun is a gardening tool. The other day, Jim had a couple of the gardening tools with him.

The local group is associated with a national organization called RAWtools, which was founded by Michael Martin, a Mennonite from Colorado. He has been partnering with the well-known evangelical Shane Claiborne. The RAWtools website says that "Our mission is to disarm hearts and forge peace."² Last spring the two published a book called *Beating Guns: Hope for People Who Are Weary of Violence*. In a related article in *The Christian Century*, the two wrote this, regarding today's reading from Isaiah:

According to the prophets ... peace does not begin with kings or presidents or heads of state. They're the ones who keep creating the wars. Peace begins with "the people." It is not politicians who lead the way to peace; it is the people of God who lead the politicians to peace. Peace begins with the people of God, who refuse to kill and who insist on beating their weapons into farm tools. The prophecy ends with the vision of a world free of violence, but it begins with us.

It is people with prophetic imagination who will become the conscience of our world and lead the politicians and presidents and kings to turn from war and stand on the side of life. We will make violence extinct by refusing to kill. Might it be that we are the people we have been waiting for?³

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church describes Advent this way: “The first season of the church year, beginning with the fourth Sunday before Christmas and continuing through the day before Christmas. The name is derived from a Latin word for ‘coming.’ The season is a time of preparation and expectation for the coming celebration of our Lord’s nativity, and for the final coming of Christ ‘in power and glory.’”⁴

It may be the church’s “New Year’s Day, but it’s not an occasion to party. Beginning our service with the Great Litany makes that clear right up front. The other traditional day for the Great Litany is the first Sunday in Lent. But while Lent is the season of penitence, Advent is the season of watchfulness and pondering and preparation. It’s the season of letting old things fall away, so that new things can grow.

Notice that our primary Gospel has now shifted from last year’s Luke to this year’s Matthew. The reading we just heard is from the speech Jesus gives his disciples just before the events of the passion. Its tone is apocalyptic. Two Sundays ago, the lectionary, looking ahead to Advent, also served up some apocalypse. One theologian, one of my seminary professors, preaching that day about those readings from Isaiah and Luke, had this to say:

I refer to these as “so-called” apocalyptic texts because of the unfortunate historical baggage the word “apocalypse” drags along with it, which is most often associated with unspeakable disasters.

So let’s remember that this ancient Greek word does not demand that we think of catastrophe when we hear it. The word “apocalypse” comes from a rather ordinary Greek verb that simply means something like taking the lid off a jar—which is why it’s often translated as “revelation.” In that sense, an apocalyptic moment is whenever something that was hidden is being revealed.

So let’s consider what that word might mean when we apply it to something more momentous than a jar, like human history. Most people assume that apocalyptic texts predict the coming of disaster in the midst of relative peace and calm. Remarkably, it’s more often exactly the opposite: in the midst of unfolding disaster, apocalyptic texts reassure us that hope is not in vain; beneath the repeated surges of social collapse and violence, there dwells an unconquerable joy.⁵

He adds this:

It's important to remember that the several writers who contributed to the one book called Isaiah did not, for the most part, live in happy times. To the contrary, many of the texts in Isaiah were produced following the unimaginable catastrophe of exile, of seeing God's own people defeated by invading armies and carted away from their homes to a foreign land where they would reside for many generations.

... still Isaiah writes of hope in soaring terms, not because of what he was at that time able to see, but because of his trust in the faithfulness of God. [It is] God's faithfulness, not ours, that makes all the difference for hope.⁶

Every life includes hardship and suffering; some we will experience and some we will witness. We will even anticipate impending apocalypse. That's why we tell the stories of God's faithfulness over and over again. They are the source of our hope. Carrying hope, we act in faith, which is living in service to God's promise.

Now, I think Advent isn't really the season of hope; rather, Christmas is the season of hope. During Advent, we get ready for Christmas. Therefore, during Advent, we get ready for hope. It's not about putting up decorations or shopping for presents. It's about preparing our hearts so that we are *able* to witness the evidence of God's faithfulness to God's people. Most of us experience hope arriving in moments unpredictable and precious. But hope springs best from cultivated ground. Tilling and tending the soil makes hope's arrival much more reliable. There are so many ways to do that. Some forge weapons into plowshares; some give food to the hungry; some pray and pray and pray.

The theologian I quoted earlier also had this to say:

Typical critiques of religious faith include complaints about rosy-colored optimism, or a kind of mass delusion. But I have been reminded recently that what is often derided as "pie-in-the-sky wishful thinking" isn't actually outrageous enough to be biblical. It's only when our imaginations are truly stretched and taxed, when a vision of flourishing life takes incredulity to new heights, only then are we tapping into the astonishing promises of a wildly extravagant God.⁷

"Might it be that we are the people we have been waiting for?"⁸ This Advent, cultivate some ground. You'll want to be ready; you don't want to miss anything: your wildly extravagant God is coming.

Notes

¹ Isaiah 2:4 NRSV.

² From “About Us” on the website of RAWtools, Inc., available at <https://rawtools.org/about-us/> (accessed December 1, 2019).

³ Shane Claiborne and Michael Martin, “Why and How We Beat Guns Into Garden Tools,” *The Christian Century*, March 4, 2019, available at <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/opinion/why-and-how-we-beat-guns-garden-tools> (accessed December 1, 2019).

⁴ “Advent,” *An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church: A User Friendly Reference for Episcopalians*, Don S. Armentrout and Robert Boak Slocum, editors, available online at <https://episcopalchurch.org/library/glossary/advent> (accessed December 1, 2019).

⁵ Jay Emerson Johnson, “‘Do not be Terrified’: Hope for the Apocalypse,” November 17, 2019, available online at <https://peculiarfaith.com/2019/11/> (accessed December 1, 2019).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Claiborne and Martin.