

Advent. That season the church has designated as the season of preparation, anticipation, and expectation of the coming of the Messiah. How do we as God's people make ready? How do we live our lives during this season of Advent?

Here it is, Dec 2nd. We begin Advent. Looking around, we can readily see that we are already behind most of the world in preparing for Christmas. We may bemoan the growing commercialization of the season that keeps backing up – even before Halloween. The stores display familiar sights and sounds – including our Christmas carols. Snow scenes with Christmas trees and Santa are everywhere. Perhaps you have already been to a small party where wassail and cookies are plentiful.

Whole neighborhoods display trees or lights to welcome the season. We do that. This week I bought my tree from the Scout Troop at the end of the street. It is not decorated, but it is standing up in my living room! I went by Pier One and got me some UNICEF Christmas cards – mostly for folks I will not see at Christmas. I even bought some candied cherries, raisins, and almond slices to go in some Christmas bread. We have to cook for our church Christmas party next Saturday at David and Melissa's place. It is truly a season of preparation.

Seems like the whole world turns toward Christmas – or at least the trappings of the holiday season. It seems natural enough to me that we Christians would turn our thoughts toward Bethlehem. But no! Not one of the lectionary passages for this first Sunday of Advent speak of shepherds watching sheep, cattle lowing or the singing of the heavenly hosts. Instead, the texts leap over the manger and look ahead to a promised time of God coming in glory. The Matthew text for today likens the coming days to the great Flood in the day of Noah, or the coming of a thief in the night – everyone is caught unaware. Isaiah paints a dramatic picture of the future house of God where the Lord "Shall judge between the nations." What is all this about?

Maybe these texts are to remind us that Advent is not about being nostalgic at the Nativity. Maybe they are saying to us the Advent is about welcoming the living Christ who is among us. Maybe these passages are trying to help us understand that the road to Bethlehem does not end there. The events that take place in the City of David are to remind us of our calling to live out this understanding of "Immanuel" God with us.

There is a wonderful scene in "Alice in Wonderland." Alice asks the Cheshire cat, who I take to be a symbol of wisdom, "Which road do I take to get out of here?" The cat answers, "That depends on where you want to go." Alice replies, "I really don't know where I want to go, I just want out of here." The cat answers, "If you don't know where you want to go, then it doesn't matter which road you take!"

There is a saying, "If you do not know where you are going, any road will take you there." The prophet Isaiah probably never heard this modern expression, but he clearly paints a picture that we as God's People have a specific destination ahead – God's Holy Mountain. It doesn't seem like a weekend hike to me. It is not for casual tourist or curious travelers. Going up this mountain is a look into God's preferred future for all creation. "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 anymore.

There it is – judgement and joy. We would all joyfully welcome weapons of war and mass destruction into being transformed into common farming tools for planting and harvesting. It is a vision so compelling that we are likely to quickly dismiss it. It is beyond what we are able to think. In our world where "Might makes right," the message of peace, of getting rid of our weapons of violence is one that we need desperately to hear during this Advent Season. Isaiah is asking us to check our road map to make sure the road we are on is leading us toward this vision of peace.

The Birmingham News of last Friday listed the 86th and 87th homicide victims in Birmingham for the year. That stat means more to me since Santiago, one of that number of 87 was a member of Youthserve. The Peace summit at Annapolis this week seeks to work on the Palestinian/Jewish conflict in the Middle East. In Atlanta, a local church sponsored a gun "buyback" day after the shooting incident in nearby Conyers. People came from near and far with pistols, sawed-off shotguns. Each person bringing a weapon was given fifty dollars. The church placed the weapons in a steel casket and buried them. Isaiah's vision inspires us to live in fresh new ways. A few years ago the War Department made a deci-

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sion to sell a huge military campus call Camp Butner to the State of North Carolina for the price of \$1. Munitions were removed. The camp was transformed into a psychiatric hospital serving 16 counties. That hospital adopted a logo inspired by Isaiah's vision: the image of a man holding a sword in one hand and exchanging it for a plow in the other.

The word picture in Isaiah begins with this "Come, let us go up ...". I guess it would be easy us to think of this as a works righteousness, where God's kingdom of light and peace is dependent on these expert mountain climbers. But the passage also speaks of a downward movement. "For out of Zion shall go forth instruction." God's word and teaching speaks of coming down to bring light, judgement and peace.

Advent is that season of preparation, anticipation and expectation. God's word calls to us pilgrims to keep putting one foot in front of the other, knowing that this destination of God's kingdom is just ahead. It is a time for us to check the road we are on. Can we see what Isaiah sees? Can we imaging God's peaceable kingdom? Isaiah is challenging all of us who are walking, hiking, rushing around to take a moment and stop. Advent calls for us to examine where we are - where we are headed.

Ann Weems has written a wonderful poem titled "Christmas Comes."

Christmas comes every time we see God in other persons. The human and the holy meet in Bethlehem, or in Times Square, (or on the streets in Birmingham) for Christmas comes like a golden storm on its way to Jerusalem-- -

Determinedly, inevitably.....
Even now it comes in the face of hatred and warring—
No atrocity too terrible to stop it,
No Herod strong enough,
No hurt deep enough,
No curse shocking enough
No disaster shattering enough.
For someone on earth will see the star,
Someone will hear the angel voices,
Someone will run to Bethlehem,
Someone will know peace and good will: The Christ is born.