

Isaiah 2:1-5  
Hope Can't Wait  
Advent 1  
December 1, 2019  
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Today is the first day of Advent, the first day of the Church year. Advent is a time of waiting and preparing. The season of Advent leads to Christmas when we celebrate the birth of a baby who, in our tradition, came to reveal the heart of God to a world that seemed to have lost its heart. This year, more than I can remember ever before, I've heard people wonder out loud how we can enter into Advent when the world is such a mess. Blogger and writer, Sarah Bessey, asks, "How can we celebrate or "get cozy," how can we turn towards Christmas, when our hearts are broken by Syria's refugees, by Hong Kong's protests, by Brexit, by the U.S.A. impeachment proceedings and detention camps, by broken treaties, by one another? When, in response to every crisis, our communities seem splintered and divided even in how to bind up each other's wounds and careless words are flung like rocks at our own glass houses? When perhaps we are lonely or bored or tired or sick or broke or afraid? When we are grieving and sad?"

My answer to that is, all of those reasons and every other bit of brokenness in our lives and in this world, are why we need this season more than ever. We are standing amidst a world that seems to have gone crazy, still waiting for the world to be made right. We need Advent. We need to light candles and read sacred words. We need to be reminded that love, peace, joy, and hope are possible and real and already here. This is good news because the world needs them now, we can't wait.

Our Advent theme this year is, "What Can't Wait?" It's a question of priorities really. Given the reality that we cannot possibly do everything that needs to be done, what can wait? What can't? And how do we decide? In our Advent devotional, today's entry is titled, "Sabbath Can't Wait." In it, we are invited to identify one thing that feels urgent, but that can actually wait so we can rest, so we can experience Sabbath. Frankly, I found this entry untimely. I mean, the pumpkins and fall leaves adorning our homes won't put themselves away. We need the space to set up the nativity scenes and greenery. There are trees to decorate and the pumpkin spice scented candles need to be swapped out for evergreen and gingerbread. Today is not the day to practice Sabbath. Sabbath can wait, right?

As I tried to brush the thought of sabbath aside, I turned my attention to writing this sermon. Today's text from Isaiah is a poem about God's vision for the world becoming reality. As I worked, it became clear to me that prioritizing sabbath was actually much more in line with the vision Isaiah was casting than the frantic seasonal switchover I had planned for Advent-Day 1. Isaiah didn't even mention the stockings hung by the chimney with glee or making a list and checking it twice. Maybe in the kin-dom of God sabbath can't wait. What else can't wait?

This is Isaiah 2:1-5:  
The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

<sup>2</sup> In 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.

<sup>3</sup> Many 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.

<sup>4</sup> He 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.

<sup>5</sup> O house of Jacob,  
come, let us walk  
in the light of the Lord!

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

Isaiah *saw* this word. God didn't speak to him in a thundering voice from the heavens or send an angel to him in a dream. Isaiah was given a picture, a vision. I imagine he saw a vivid, detailed image, and even when he got distracted for a while, doing the dishes or vacuuming, the vision returned, clearer than ever. It was the kind of thing he couldn't "unsee." About this text, theologian Walter Brueggemann wrote, "...it is a vision, an act of imagination that looks beyond present dismay through the eyes of God, to see what will be that is not yet." Isaiah's vision was not at all based in reality.

The city of Jerusalem in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, was a marginal and at-risk place. Jerusalem lived and flourished, or decayed and suffered, at the whim of the powerful, who cared little about the well-being of the people. The people were used to that. There was no reason for them to think the future would be any different than the past; they would always be at the mercy of the rich and powerful. As a result, the people were desperate and fearful. Life was hard. They turned their backs on the ways of God and, subsequently, on each other.

Just a few verses before Isaiah's vision, he described what his eyes actually saw in Jerusalem and he pronounced some pretty hefty judgment on the people there:

How the faithful city  
has become a whore!  
She that was full of justice,

righteousness lodged in her—  
but now murderers!

<sup>22</sup> Your silver has become dross,  
your wine is mixed with water.

<sup>23</sup> Your princes are rebels  
and companions of thieves.

Everyone loves a bribe  
and runs after gifts.

They do not defend the orphan,  
and the widow's cause does not come before them.

<sup>24</sup> Therefore says the Sovereign, the Lord of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel:

Ah, I will pour out my wrath on my enemies,  
and avenge myself on my foes!

<sup>25</sup> I will turn my hand against you...

I know what you're thinking, "It's Advent, can't we just keep the talk of judgment, murderers and thieves on the down low and focus on the baby Jesus?" It's tempting, and would be a whole lot easier, to spend the next several weeks telling stories of angels and shepherds and the sweet little baby Jesus. But I wonder how meaningful those stories would be if we don't acknowledge our need, the world's need, for the message found in them. Because the truth is, the world is still a lot more like Jerusalem in the 8<sup>th</sup> century than it is like the world the prophet (and God) envisioned.

Against the vulnerability and hardship of ancient Jerusalem, Isaiah imagined a spectacular future for the city. He was able to see beyond spears and swords, tools of death and violence, to a world where, not only were those tools obsolete, they were repurposed as raw materials for instruments of life, like plowshares and pruning hooks. In the world Isaiah imagined, those new tools would be used to nurture rather than destroy. What Isaiah *saw* was the earth transformed, there was life, there was hope. People of God, we have to see that vision too.

\*Hope can't wait.

Hope can't wait because, as I mentioned earlier, we are living in a time fraught with bad news. More than 1 in 5 children in America live in poverty and this country's economic disparity, the most extreme in the developed world, continues to grow. Our political system seems broken, captive to the greediest and most cynical. Almost every week there is a natural disaster of epic proportions: floods, droughts, hurricanes or forest fires. Scientists tell us this will continue and worsen unless we address climate change globally. Yet, just living our day to day lives requires so much of us that the thought of seriously engaging any one of these realities is overwhelming (Paul Rogat Loeb, *The Impossible Will Take a Little While*, p. 2).

Hope can't wait.

In a 2009 commencement address at the University of Portland, author, activist, environmentalist, and entrepreneur, Paul Hawken, talked to the graduates about what the world required of them in "such a time as this". He said, "You are going to have to figure out

what it means to be a human being on earth at a time when every living system is declining. Kind of a mind-boggling situation...but not one peer-reviewed paper published in the last thirty years can refute that statement. Basically, civilization needs a new operating system, you are the programmers, and we need it within the next few decades. The planet came with instructions, but we seem to have misplaced them. Important rules like don't poison the water, soil, or air, don't let the earth get overcrowded, and don't touch the thermostat, have been broken."

Hope can't wait.

There is no shortage of reasons to despair. Even if we narrow the scope from what's wrong with the world or our nation to what's wrong in our own homes, it's a lot. Recently, I attended a training for community leaders which focused on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and their impact on public health and social functioning. Examples of ACEs are physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, a caregiver who is addicted to drugs or alcohol, being exposed to parental conflict, as indicated by separation or divorce, or living in a home with a person who had a mental illness

As the presenter discussed the list of ACEs and how they affect brain development and even the expression of genetic code, I felt deep sadness. So many of us carry the weight of trauma. There is so much brokenness and it affects every aspect of our lives, our relationships, our children and our children's children. I wondered, can broken people repair a broken world?

After the presenter gave us all of this hard news, she shared a bit of good news and here it is: Having just one person in our lives who we can trust and who cares about us has the power to change otherwise pretty predictable outcomes. Having that one person on our side, brings our traumatized selves hope for a future that is different from the past. That's right, we have the capacity to be hope for each other and for the world. I'm reminded of a song by Christian artist Matthew West that begins with a list of all the things wrong with the world. And then the chorus comes along, "So, I shook my fist at Heaven and said, "God, why don't You do something?" [He] God said, "I did, yeah, I created you." You and me...all of us are the ways in which God brings hope to the world.

Rev. Victoria Safford, the minister of White Bear Unitarian Church, in Mahtomedi, MN, wrote a beautiful essay titled, "The Small Work in the Great Work," In it, she wrote about our role in this world, a world that often seems more desperate than hopeful. She wrote, "Our mission is to plant ourselves at the gates of Hope — not the prudent gates of Optimism, which are somewhat narrower; nor the stalwart, boring gates of Common Sense; nor the strident gates of Self-Righteousness, which creak on shrill and angry hinges; nor the cheerful, flimsy garden gate of "Everything is gonna be all right." But a different, sometimes lonely place, the place of truth-telling, about your own soul first of all and its condition, the place of resistance and defiance, the piece of ground from which you see the world both as it is and as it could be, as it will be; the place from which you glimpse not only struggle, but joy in the struggle. And we stand there, beckoning and calling, telling people what we are seeing, asking people what they see."

Truth-telling...really seeing ourselves and seeing the world for what it is, what it could be, what it will be and realizing that getting from here to there is going to take work. It is not going to be easy. But we don't have to do it alone. That's why it's so important that we take time to ask our neighbors what they see. What does hope look like to you? We are called to stand at the gates of hope, not as gatekeepers, but as gate holders, holding that gate wide open. Because the hope in Isaiah's vision, the hope that Jesus came to reveal...that hope, that vision, is for everybody. And we have to work for it...all of us. We cannot give up.

I think this is what Paul Hawken was getting at in his commencement address in Portland when, after delivering all the bad news about the world, he told the graduates that on the back of their diploma was a hidden message that needed to be decoded. He said he would save them the trouble and just tell them what it said, "You are brilliant and the earth is hiring." Tell the world...hope can't wait. Amen.