

November 27th, 2022
First Sunday in Advent

Isaiah 2:1-5 “The Mountain of the Lord”

I learned something about Advent a few weeks ago. For as long as I've been here in Chico we've designated each Sunday of Advent as Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. Four Sundays in Advent, four designations with four advent candles in our wreath along with the Christ candle that we save for Christmas day. I used to think this tradition was as old as the church itself. Every mainline church I've ever been involved with practiced this tradition. Four Sundays in Advent, three purple candles, one pink candle and the white Christ candle in the middle. But over the years, I noticed discrepancies in the designation of the candles and the order that the candles were to be lit. Every year, Briony, Jay Nelson, and I would have this discussion about the “proper” order. It's Hope, Peace, Joy, then Love, right? Yeah. Sure. Except when you do a Google search, you discover that for some it's Hope, Love, Joy then Peace. I found one source that had Hope, *Faith*, Joy then Peace. Where's the love, right? To complicate matters even more, I found another source where the candles represent Prophecy, Bethlehem, Shepherd, and Angels. There was no consistency! So I thought, “Well let's check out the history of the advent candles. Surely this has been around since ... what ... maybe the 2nd century at the latest?” No! In fact for the longest time, the church didn't even care that much about *when* Jesus was born! It wasn't until 221 AD that a church historian named Sextus Julius Africanus identified December 25 as a possible date for Jesus' birth. There are so many problems with that date that I'm not even going to go into this morning. And it wasn't until *much* later that the church actually celebrated Christmas, and even then it was a *minor* feast compared to others throughout the year. As the Christian faith moved farther north, many believe that the church started nonchalantly appropriating pagan solstice festivals. Winter solstice represented the re-birth of the sun. It's the shortest day of the year, and from that point on, days just keep getting longer until summer solstice

when the days get shorter again. Why not connect the birth of God's son to this pagan belief? Maybe it will help convert some of these pagans!

This still doesn't answer the question about the proper order of advent candles though. Get this ... advent candles didn't make an appearance in Christian faith and practice until 1839 in Hamburg, Germany! Pastor Johann Hinrich Wichern used a cartwheel to help the children in his mission school count the days until Christmas. He'd use small candles that were lit every weekday, then on Sundays he'd use a large white candle. Wow! What a great idea Pastor Wichern! How did you come up with this? Well, he borrowed the idea from Pagans in Scandinavia! They would place lit candles on a wheel as an offering to their god of light, in the hopes that the earth's wheel would be turned back toward the sun, thereby bringing light and warmth. I hope you all understand that Christmas would be kind of dull if not for the pagans.

Okay, but where did these colored candles come from? I'm still trying to figure out whether I'm being "liturgically correct" here! What candle am I supposed to light? What am I supposed to call them? What order am I supposed to light them? What do they even mean!? Come to find out, German immigrants brought this tradition to America in the 20th century and *we're* the ones who started using them in worship services! And it wasn't until much later in the 20th century that we assigned any kind of meaning or any colors to each of the candles! And there is *no* rhyme or reason or even a "correct" way to use them! So, you know who gets to determine the order of the advent candles this year? Me! I know the *Caller* says it's "Hope" Sunday, but I'm going to play the pastor card and declare that it's *Peace Sunday*! Why? Because this passage Bill read from Isaiah chapter 2 is about beating swords into ploughshares and studying war no more! So how did I determine what passage of scripture I would use this morning? Because I follow the Revised Common Lectionary ... which has only been around since 1992. I know. I own my hypocrisy.

Anyway. Isaiah was a prophet who lived in Jerusalem before the Babylonian Empire conquered Judah and Israel and shipped their leaders back to Babylon for 70 years. Politically speaking, it was a mess. There was a threat from the Assyrians in the north, a similar threat from the Egyptians in the west and of course the Babylonians in the east. This once formidable kingdom of Israel was now a divided kingdom led by corrupt kings. This weakened their ability to defend against their enemies and Jerusalem became a target for occupation for three super-powers who all wanted their land and resources. According to Isaiah, sin was to blame for Jerusalem's situation. They were dishonest, corrupt, and immoral. They craved wealth and luxury. They were irresponsible and got into the habit of oppressing people who were on the bottom of the social hierarchy. They worshipped other gods and rebelled against God's divine will. They were facing some big trouble and many other prophets did everything they could to warn Israel and Judah about what would happen if they didn't repent. In chapter 1 verses 21-23 Isaiah said,

“How the faithful city has become a whore! She that was full of justice, righteousness lodged in her - but now murderers! Your silver has become dross, your wine is mixed with water. 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.”

In the big picture, though, Isaiah's message to Jerusalem became a message of promise in the midst of despair and hope for eventual redemption. The passage that Bill read starts out with the words, “In the days to come.” Most people think, “Uh-oh,” when a prophet who is speaking to a corrupt and sinful nation says, “In the days to come.” This is where we usually hear about wars, earthquakes, famines, and plagues. But instead, Isaiah paints a different picture. He talks about the establishment of God's house on the highest mountains. One where *all nations* will travel in order to receive fair arbitration and learn to walk in God's path. The result of this arbitration? People will lay down their

swords and spears and transform their weapons of war into ploughshares and pruning hooks – instruments of provision for basic human needs. They will “study war no more” and walk *together* in God’s light. All nations will walk together in God’s light.

Again, this doesn’t seem like the typical, “Repent or be destroyed” message you’d expect from a prophet who is warning people about their imminent demise. Isaiah’s prophesy doesn’t refer to the end of time or beyond like others do. He anticipates the radical transformation of *this* time and *this* reality. And this vision is for ALL people ... and ALL generations. Not just Israel. God shall, “judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for *many* peoples.” Sounds like something Jesus would say, right? Well, considering that Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah more than any other book of the Old Testament it shouldn’t surprise us that Jesus’ vision is in line with Isaiah’s. The connection between this promise in the book of Isaiah and the Kingdom of God that Jesus preaches is easy to see.

The prophet Isaiah dreamed of the day when the wolf and the lamb would lie down together. In other words, the laws of nature that causes the strong to devour the weak would be abolished. How can that happen? That doesn’t make sense at all. That’s the way wolves are wired. A wolf can’t help but devour a lamb. Yes, but a human being who takes bribes, runs after gifts, and does not defend the orphan and the widow *can* help it. They *can* restrain their sinful nature. It takes some practice and imagination, but they can do it. And imagination is what this text in Isaiah is all about. Transferring our *hope* to another reality. One that is different than the one we live in. One where what we take for granted as immutable social realities can be re-formed and *transformed* - where we can have the courage to redeem injustices no matter how bad the odds look. So maybe this *is* hope Sunday. I don’t know.

Theologian Walter Brueggemann makes the connection between Isaiah’s message and Jesus’ vision of God’s kingdom in the commentary *Texts for Preaching*. He writes:

The vision of Isaiah is “an act of imagination that looks beyond present dismay through the eyes of God, to see what will be that is not yet. That is the function of promise (and therefore of Advent) in the life of faith. Under promise, in Advent, faith sees what will be that is not yet.”

When all the nations learn God’s ways, then war is no longer needed as the arbiter. Instead, God will be the judge. God will be the arbiter of justice. And what does God’s justice look like? Love and peace, not nationalism and endless war. Well, here we are talking about peace again. Maybe it is Peace Sunday. Or is it Hope Sunday? I guess you can’t have one without the other. Let’s just say it’s both. Are we okay with that?

Isaiah invites us to live and walk into this vision. Don’t just sit around and wait for it. It’s so close to being here. Jesus would often tell his disciples and those he taught that, “The kingdom of God is at hand.” Isaiah was saying the same thing. He wasn’t just making a proclamation. He was setting a vision. The message of Advent is, “How will you accept this invitation, and how will you extend it to others?”

Many times we talk about the journey of faith without adequately describing, as Isaiah does, what the destination looks like. What is the Kingdom of God? What does the Kingdom of God look like for our community here in Chico? How does that vision guide our ministry as individuals and as a church? If God’s vision is indeed universal and embraces the idea that war does not lead to peace, is that *really* good news? If division does not lead to peace, what does that say to us here in the first quarter of the 21st century? War does *not* lead to peace. *Division* does not lead to peace. Only relying on God’s love, forgiveness and grace leads to peace, and that peace is driven by the hope that we have as we anticipate and prepare ourselves for the birth of Christ.