

First Sunday of Advent Sunday, November 28, 2010

FIRST READING: Isaiah 2:1-5

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

2In 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.

3Many 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.

4He 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.

5O house of Jacob,
come, let us walk
in the light of the LORD!

Swords into Plowshares; Spears into Pruning Hooks

+ *In nomine Domini. Amen.*

There it was just last Thursday, Thanksgiving Day ... one of the advertisements that were sprinkled with such frequency during the broadcast of the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade that there seemed to be more ads for the next day's *Black Friday* sales than there was actual "parade" ... there it was, the clip that ran almost subliminally that it surely infected the minds of millions of viewers, there with some jingly music in the background came the announcement for which the world has been holding its breath, the proclamation for which we have all been waiting, the news item of news items ... "*No one does Christmas like NBC!*"

No one ... not you, not me, not us, certainly not the Church ... no, it was taken care of on Thursday morning ... NBC is going to do it all.

I should be relieved! We no longer have to pray that ancient First Sunday of Advent Prayer of the Day ... *Excita, quaesumus Domine, potentiam tuam, et veni!* (Summon all your strength. O Lord, and come.) The Holy One can rest as on the last day of Creation ... someone else is taking over ☺

In some ways, it's the ultimate Anachronistic Award (which we here at Christ Lutheran Church in Santa Fe present on this First Sunday of Advent every year) ... perhaps we should send one of our *suitable for framing, highly coveted* awards to Broadcast Headquarters ☺

And yes, I know what they meant, they're talking about the Holiday Season, what we used to call the *secular* Christmas, the broadcasting of heart-wrenching shows and stories that pull at our ever emotion ... they're making a promise that if you stay tuned to that station, then you will have all that the Season can bring you visually and audibly and emotionally.

So OK, NBC's going to take care of all that ... and that means that we who have dared to walk into this sacred space this morning where we see that things churchly and liturgical have changed, we who light candles in a different way, and sing our melodies in a different manner ... we take hold of the ancient Story and open the book and read from words that were composed sometime in the 8th Century BCE, words that speak not of the past, but of the future, of God's future, which is always the future for God's people as well ... words that speak warning and judgment of "hypocritical worship, complacency, and the failure to act with justice for the poor"¹ as well as "resounding words of promise, announcing God's coming messianic kingdom."² ... words which followers of Jesus from the earliest times have seen as pointing to the Christ in whom they felt "all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell"³ ... as we heard from Paul of Tarsus last Sunday in his memo to the congregation in Colossae, an ancient city of Phrygia, sitting on a tributary of the Maeander River in which is now southern Turkey.

Words of warning and judgment, words of promise and hope ... the season into which we enter whose name in Latin means simply "coming" (*adventus*).

No one knows for certain how Advent began, but the custom is quite ancient, dating back to the 4th Century CE. We do know that St. Perpetuus of Tours in about the year 480 decreed a fast three times a week from the feast of St. Martin (November 11) until Christmas. In 567, the Second Council of Tours commanded monks to fast from the beginning of December until Christmas ... and this penance was soon extended to the laity and pushed back to begin on St. Martin's Day. This 45-day *Advent* was nicknamed "St. Martin's Lent."⁴ ... or as we called it at St. Luke's Lutheran Church in Dublin, PA where I grew up ... "The Little Lent" ... complete with all the somberness of a Pennsylvania German congregation in the midst of "holiday" preparations.

But, still and all, and in this sacred space ... Advent! The *Season* of Advent.

We deal with *seasons* in the church calendar, in congregational life, not *days*. The Festival Days are there of course, and without them, the calendar and our liturgical and congregation life would not take shape nor make much sense ... but it is the *seasons* that flow toward those days and from those days that make our time together full and abundant.

We all know that Christmas Day is December 25th, but the *season* of preparation begins in our ritualistic and ordered way this morning and lasts for 4 weeks ... marked here, as we always remind ourselves, by the 4 candles of the Advent Wreath ... and the *season* that flows from Christmas Day is of course that which lasts for 12 and concludes on the Feast of the Epiphany of

¹ Quotation taken from an excellent website called "Enter the Bible" provided by Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN. It is most helpful for both laity and clergy, academics and non-academics in learning basic summaries of each of the books of both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Writings (i.e. the Bible). The Isaiah reference is found at: <http://www.enterthebible.org/Bible.aspx?rid=43>

² Ibid.

³ Colossians 1.19

⁴ From *An Advent Sourcebook*, Thomas J. O'Gorman, ed. Liturgy Training Publications, 1988, p. 5. (This, and all the liturgical Sourcebooks published by LTP, have become rare, sadly. I could not begin, nor endure Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost ... without them.)

our Lord, January 6th ... and Epiphany has its own *season*, as does Lent, and Easter, and Pentecost until we find ourselves once again (as we will next year about this time) at the beginning of the *season* of Advent.

It is how we count time, it is how we order our understanding of our spirituality, of our worship, of our gathering and listening and sharing and communing and sending ... all wrapped in the Story ... the story which today has nothing to do with sugarplums and fairies but with a promise that is a holy promise ... a future that is understood as being not from within ourselves but from outside ourselves coming to us with hope as it did some 800 years before the birth of the one we call Jesus of Nazareth.

[Isaiah speaks] “Come, let us go 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.”

What a statement! Imagine these words as you are a Jew being taken away into captivity by a foreign power into a foreign place called Babylon ... the Prophet speaks with judgment and yet always, always with promise and hope ... for what comes next, what words come into reality as we read them here and bring them to life ... bring them into our midst ... into our Advent, into our time of watching and waiting and preparing and hoping? ... What comes next is the image of God who, since the nations cannot seem to manage it themselves ... since nations seem bent upon taking and not giving, upon fighting and not cooperating, upon war and not peace ... God, taking over, says the Prophet, will “arbitrate for many peoples” and then come those most often quoted words:

“ ... 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.”

It is the hope of Advent, as true for the people of Israel as for us, as true for us as for the people of Israel ... what holiness awaits those who lift up sword against each other? No ...

It is a vision of God’s transformed world, where injustices are drenched in forgiveness and love and made right in the amendment of life and community.

In Isaiah’s vision it is the movement of a people from being held to a war-economy and rather moving to a sustainable agriculture economy ... not swords, but plowshares ... not spears, but pruning hooks ...

I have to admit that I never quite understood those words in Church when I was little, I never quite caught the image ... until I was helping my Grandfather one Spring afternoon as we prepared the machinery that was drawn behind our tractor for what everyone called “Spring Plowing.”

My Grandfather was unbolting the tips of the plows ... the devices which when pulled plunged into the earth turning it over so that new seed could be sown into the ground, producing in a few months a healthy crop of wheat or oats or corn.



I had never seen new tips placed onto the plows before and I asked my Grandfather what it was all about?

“New plowshares,” he answered. “They wear out, you have to replace them,” as he bolted the new shiny plowshare into place.

And then my Grandfather did what he always did around such farm events ... he quoted a poem, this time it was the words of Isaiah, “They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks.” And then he looked up at me and said, “See you can’t plow with a sword, it just doesn’t work ... it’s meant for killing, not saving lives with food. God was right.”

Here endeth the Lesson from my Grandfather.

There are many things we face as we move into this season of preparation ... and one of those today is that simple lesson from the Prophet whose words of hope and promise were lived out in the person of Jesus and who in turn called his followers to the same thing ... we could say “a ministry of plowshares and pruning hooks.”

So, brothers and sisters, it would be a good thing this Advent for us to remember that and to march into each day thinking of what swords we are carrying about with us that need to be beaten into plowshares and what spears we have in our hands that need to be turned into pruning hooks ... ?

... what anxiety beaten into trust ... what fear turned into serenity ... what animosity beaten into compassion and tolerance ... what anger turned into love?

It’s not a bad way at all to begin this holy season ... not a bad way to spend it completely as we watch and wait for the one who comes to us with love and forgiveness and asks us to love and forgive in return.

Let us pray. *Excita, quaesumus Domine, potentiam tuam, et veni.* Stir up your power, Lord Christ, and come. By your merciful protection save us from the threatening dangers of our sins, and enlighten our walk in the way of your salvation, for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

Deo Gratias (+)
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