

Our Wait Continues

Isaiah 2:1-5; Romans 13:11-14; Matt 23:36-44
Ps 122 – Responsive Reading

In 1904, Mark Twain wrote the famous short story, "The War Prayer." It's about a church who is gathered together, prior to sending their sons off to battle. The minister leads them in a very stirring prayer, asking God to grant victory, to give courage, to lead these young men forth into the glory of a righteous cause.

At the close of the prayer a stranger steps to the pulpit. Speaking for God, he reveals to the people what they have just prayed for, in graphic detail - the horror, destruction and death, they have just invoked upon their enemy. Sadly, the people consider this stranger a lunatic, because there was no sense in what he said.

The older we get, the more important the past becomes it seems. For some, remembering a time many years ago is easier than recalling what happened only yesterday. When we think of Christmas, there is an instant divide in our congregation. For the older folks, it's a warm recollection from the past, wistfulness for days gone by. Many conversations revolve around - "Do you remember when?"

But the youngest of our fellowship, do not look back when it comes to Christmas. Their eyes are looking forward. Anticipation, not nostalgia, is the overriding emotion. Tomorrow is so near they can almost taste it, and yet it seems like it takes forever for it to get here. The upcoming 25 days will seem like a life time for them.

Today is the beginning of the church year with Advent. It's an intentional time of preparation for the coming of Christ, who has already come to earth, and will come again. Advent is a time of looking in three directions. We reflect on the miraculous Christmas stories. We are reminded to notice Jesus in our midst today. And we look forward with hope to our Redeemer breaking into our midst, today and in the future.

Here is a summary of our four texts. "All nations will stream to the Lord's temple. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore. People will stream to Jerusalem to praise the name of the Lord. The law of the Lord will go out and there will be prosperity & peace. Wake up from your slumber; our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. Let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently and instead, clothe ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore keep watch. Be ready. For the hour and day the master returns."

A contemporary of Mark Twain was a reformer by the name of Julia Ward Howe. She was an American poet and author, and a social activist, particularly for women's suffrage. She was the first to propose an annual "Mothers' Day" in 1870, after the American Civil War. But her proposal had a very different twist and focus than what Mother's Day is today.

Julia Howe had seen enough bloodshed in her lifetime, that she called for the observance of a "Mothers' Day for Peace," a time for women everywhere to stand up and say, "No More!" Howe dedicated the celebration to the eradication of war, and organized festivities in Boston for years. "Why do not the mothers of mankind interfere in these matters," she said, "to prevent the waste of that human life of which they alone bear and know the cost?"

We relish Christmas memories with delight; we plan our family and church rituals with joy; and we anticipate the Redeemer's return. We recall that tiny baby Jesus, God with us, so vulnerable and marginal; there was no room in the Inn. But he was the means The Almighty chose to step into the life of this world in order to save us from ourselves. We agonize as we marvel at the vision Yahweh puts before us of the future – of what can and should be. We must not skip over the incredible number of verses we use at Christmas that are about justice, repentance, peace, and those upsidedown kingdom themes.

On March 10, 2003, during a London concert, nine days before the known 2003 invasion of Iraq, lead vocalist Maines of the Dixie Chicks, told the audience: "We don't want this war, this violence, and we're ashamed that the President of the United States (George W. Bush) is from Texas." This received a positive reaction from the British audience. But it had a negative reaction, and boycotts, in the United States. Talk shows denounced the band, their albums were discarded in public protest and corporate broadcasting networks blacklisted them for the remainder of the Bush years.

The comment angered many country music fans and was financially damaging to the Dixie Chicks. There were death threats and so on, even after trying to explain the comment, as well as an apology. But they still had many fans and popular albums. A film about them in 2006 caused this comment from a leading film person: "It's a sad commentary about the level of fear in our society, that a movie about a group of courageous entertainers, who were blacklisted for exercising their right of free speech, is now itself being blacklisted by corporate America."

After taking a break from 2008 to 2014, the Dixie Chicks are touring again. They have won a number of Grammy's and had some great songs. But recently some fans expressed their unhappiness with them again, because they are back up singers on an album. People are refusing to see because of the idols they have.

Meanwhile, the Middle East is still producing refugees, killings, political turmoil, and costing trillions of dollars that could be better spent. Not many swords are becoming plowshares. Since 9 / 11, most of the countries of the world have increased their military spending, above inflation. Arms sales are good business and helpful in forming political alliances. But do they make us safer? Are nations going into deep debt for military costs? Imagine how that money could improve people's lives instead!

Advent is wild but we have domesticated, tamed it. We have watered it down to just warm fuzzy feelings, memories, ceremonies, and shopping.

Many even try to take Jesus out of it. But Advent should startle us because it says, what is – should not be. And what should be – is coming – like it or not, so get ready! Watch out.

Advent, which begins today, is a season for people like you and me who need a fresh take on life, a vision of something more than what we've come to think of as "reality." It's for folks like us, who may have lost that childhood faith in Christmas. It's for those who may have been burned one too many times to believe any more in the underlying goodness of people. It's for those whose heart's desire was never really fulfilled. It's for those who have grown tired of the same old lines repeated over & over again. It's for those who just plain know too much to believe that impossible things can come true.

Advent points us to our Creator's Way of Living. That small baby invites us to imagine again. To grow our faith, love and hope. To dream the seemingly impossible. Together we enter the Advent season crying out to God to break into our lives with a new light and a new hope. But we are tired of waiting for the Advent promises. We ask the question, God what are you waiting for? May we allow the scriptures of Advent to become real in our lives. Immanuel – be with us! Isaiah tell us, Consider the "days to come" (2:2). What the Bible promises in the Christ Child seems a fantasy when we look around. So we need help once again to dream, expect and see the improbable

My oldest sister had a big poster on the stairs up to her rented apartment years ago. Her land lady hated that poster. Why? It went some thing like this: "It will be a great day when the military has to hold a bake sale and schools have all the funds they need."

Growing up in Taiwan, with the second largest air base in the Orient at the time, just outside of town, I saw a part of how the US military turned Southeast Asia into a cesspool of sin. The effects are still present today. This is the part of the military that no one wants to talk about. Every military force in history has its camp followers. The Allies in Vietnam were not the exception.

I saw how 5,000 airmen corrupted the country. And over the succeeding years I had a sense of how many Southeast Asian countries were changed. Drugs, drunkenness and prostitution catered to all the military men.

Of course the locals saw an opportunity to make money. So just like many Africans enslaved their fellow Africans to sell to white traders for the slave trade, so did many Thais, Taiwanese, Philipinos, Vietnamese and so on, force or at least encouraged prostitution of their women, and young boys. Everyone knew what R & R meant – Rest and Recreation, that most soldiers serving in Vietnam participated in. They would get a deserved break and many choose to - what happens in Asia, doesn't really stay in Asia.

So, Advent is a time for repentance. As our text from Romans says, "So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light." Every season in the church year is some how wrapped up in repentance, in turning away from sin and turning toward God. That's because it's difficult, if well nigh impossible, to grasp something new when we are hanging on to the "same old, same old." But the Almighty has offered us a baby to follow, His Son, taking us on a different path, a different vision.

Advent is not merely about preparing for Christmas - getting ready to receive once again the baby Jesus into our lives. That's part of it, but if it were only that - Christmas would easily get packed away with the other decorations and stuck up in the attic until next year.

Advent, though, is about opening our eyes to a bigger reality – to take in the advent scriptures as real, for right now and the future. The scriptures and the creeds of the church of Jesus Christ speak of a second coming, a second advent of God's beloved Son into this world. Our Savior came as a child 2000 years ago. Our Redeemer will come again. Our Great Shepherd longs to be our Shepherd today and help us love Him and each other more than violence – not just some day, but right now. What this means, among other things, is that God is not finished. There is more than we dare imagine waiting on the

horizon. That impossible possibility, as the apostle Paul wrote long ago, "is nearer to us than when we became believers" (Ro. 13:11). It is not just something for us to dream about in the sweet by and by – it's a vision for us to work toward – right now!

Phillip Berrigan, a radical peacemaking priest, used to tell this joke. A family had one child who was hopelessly negative and depressed. They had a second child who to them was annoyingly, hopeful, sunny and irrepressible. They took both of them to a therapist, who said, "Look Christmas is coming; why don't you try giving the little pessimistic kid everything he could want. And for our little optimist, well, just give him a bucket of horse shit."

So Christmas morning they tiptoed downstairs to see how things were going. There was the first child sitting in a pile of toys complaining. The bike is the wrong color, the toy rocket already crashed, and the other presents were junk!

Meanwhile, the irrepressible child was running round the house happily carrying the bucket of horse dung. The parents said, "What gives? All you got was this pail of manure." The child looked up and proclaimed, "There's gotta be a pony around here somewhere."

It's good that Advent comes around regularly. It reminds us that God is bigger than our reality and our imagination. Vincent Harding, freedom struggle veteran and historian once said, "You can't make a movement happen, you can only prepare for it."

For us, we are invited to help God's Incarnation happen, by accept Jesus Christ as a gift. We can expectantly prepare for Emmanuel with us, and stake our lives and hopes on Lord Jesus Christ.

So let's continue to watch, hope, pray, get ready, keep waiting, act, live as Yahweh wants us to live, and keep our eyes and souls open to see what God has done, is doing, can do and will do. May we put aside our deeds of darkness and "clothe ourselves with the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ" as we wait & walk in the His light.