

Waiting on the World to Change?
Isaiah 2:1-5 Matthew 24:36-44

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Advent. What a strange time of year. Outside the church building it's all holly and jolly and merry and bright. And inside, yeah, we're preparing for the coming of baby Jesus, but we've also got a lot of scripture preparing us for the second coming of Jesus, aka the End with a capital "E". You know, cozy holiday stuff. It does feel pretty festive in here thanks to all our hard-working decorators, but even our banners reminding us of the familiar Advent themes hint at a less-than-merry reality. We wouldn't have to be reminded of love if we always saw it all over the world. We wouldn't have to be reminded to practice joy if we didn't have so many reasons to lament. We wouldn't have to be reminded to hope if it wasn't so easy to despair. And we wouldn't have to be reminded that peace is possible if we did not live in such a war-torn world.

But clearly, we do need the reminders. So, while it seems weird to talk about the end times at the beginning of our liturgical year, maybe a new year is a new chance to set our eyes back on the prize, back on the Kingdom of God. That kingdom where everyone will live in harmony. "Where nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore." Isaiah gives us the vague timetable for this vision as "In days to come." Jesus, infuriating as ever, doesn't tell us when the Son of Man will appear. All we know is that he will come at an hour we do not expect. And so, we practice one of two major themes in Advent: we wait. Okay, but how do we wait?

In meditating on this first Sunday of Advent, I was reminded of a song that came out the year I graduated high school: "Waiting on the World to Change" by John Mayer. In short, it lamented the violence and corruption of the systems that rule our lives. But, as the lyrics go, "We just feel like we don't have the means to rise above and beat it. So we keep on waitin', waitin' on the world to change." At the time, it spoke to how many of my peers and I did feel in the face of those systems: overwhelmed and helpless. But it also allowed us to remain complacent, it did nothing to empower us. In a way, it sounds like the message in our gospel reading: we're waiting on the world to change because only God knows when that's going to happen. It's a job too big for us humans. But there is another just-as-important theme in Advent that gives more complex meaning to the way we are instructed to wait: vigilance. Jesus tells us we must be ready. This is not an inactive, complacent wait.

"For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man... they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage...they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away." The one in the field and the one grinding meal will be swept away in judgement like those swept away in the flood. The ones left will be there when the Kingdom comes on Earth as it is in Heaven. But Noah knew what was coming. And he prepared. His preparations seemed ridiculous to those around him, his actions were totally counter to

the culture of his day. He was laughed at for his convictions. But he was the one left to build the world according to God's will. And so are we meant to stay awake and prepare. Advent is less like reading a magazine in a waiting room till the nurse calls your name, and more like a crouching tiger with engaged, fine-tuned muscles ready to pounce on its prize.

What would it look like if we were dedicated to stretching our peace-building muscles every day? What would it look like if we were dedicated to a vision of peace like the one Isaiah illustrates for his people, where all the nations who were once at war with another, flowed together and learned war no more? What if we were committed to a vision where we, along with Russia, China – North Korea, even – beat our death-dealing warheads into peace-profiting words? We might get laughed at like Noah did. We might get overwhelmed with the immensity of that vision. But maybe if we keep our eyes open, fixed on that prize, we will find manageable steppingstones that will lead us toward it. And we will meet fellow blessed peacemakers along the way.

Pedro Reyes is a Mexican artist who initiated a project in a city that had a staggering rate of gun deaths. He and his team collected 1,527 unwanted guns, melted them down, and created 1,527 shovel heads. And it didn't stop there. He sent those shovels to schools and other institutions where they were used to plant 1,527 trees. A similar initiative has been supported by our own NH Conference UCC here in the Granite State. Guns to Gardens takes unwanted guns and transforms them into garden tools and works of art. Isaiah's vision of people beating their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks and learning war no more is always being realized in small ways. We have the power – and certainly the inspiration – to do something similar. To support collaborative initiatives like our conference has. Or to make something new that is especially meaningful to our local communities.

The point is, even though we are waiting, we must not be complacent. Even when we feel overwhelmed, we are not helpless. Maybe Advent falls somewhere between "Waiting on the World to Change" and "*Being* the change you want to see in the world." After all, it is a strange counter cultural season of contradictions. It is the beginning of our year and we're talking about the end times. We are simultaneously anticipating Jesus, the child coming in a stable; and Christ, died and risen and coming in majesty. We are waiting and we are working. Old Testament scholar Fred Gaiser writes, "Perhaps by practicing God's peace we can make our own little piece of "Zion" begin to reflect some of the attractiveness of Isaiah's "mountain of the Lord" that will draw others to come and see just what God is up to among these odd people who worship a baby in a manger." May it be so.