

**New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario**

**Sunday, November 27, 2016**

**Rev. Andrew Reid**

**Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122; Matthew 24:36-44**

**“Anticipating hope”**

The season of Advent opens today. For us who are people of faith and followers of Jesus Christ, Advent is a time of waiting, of anticipation, of preparation for the coming of Christ. Of course, life today being what it is, Advent can also be a time of frantic activity if we allow ourselves to be caught up in the frenetic commercialism that usually marks the weeks leading up to Christmas.

But if we want it to be, if we can find time, even if it means deliberately making time, Advent can be a time of quiet reflection and meditation.

Making time for quiet reflection and meditation doesn't mean that we should do nothing or shut ourselves off from the rest of the world. On the contrary, our quiet reflection and meditation is an opportunity to remind ourselves just what we believe.

For Advent is not just about waiting for Jesus' coming as the Child in the manger on Christmas Day. It is also about waiting for his second coming. This was what the disciples, and the early churches, were expecting. They had no need to celebrate Jesus' coming into the world as the Child in the manger: that had already happened, and was firmly in the past. They were now looking forward to his coming again, most likely very soon, even within their own lifetimes.

Which goes a long way to explaining why only two of the four Gospels record the story of Jesus' birth, and why they each give a different account of it. Of course the coming into the world of the Saviour of the world was important, but for them, it was history, and was behind them. Rather than look back on it, they now looked forward to his coming again, which they believed would be soon.

If we were to think about Advent that way, it would put Advent, and our Christmas preparations, in a completely different light. It would remind us that we are waiting for Christ, not for Christmas. Hold on to that thought for a moment. I will come back to it.

Isaiah 2:1-5 is a poem, or, if you prefer, a hymn, of hope. It introduces a collection of prophecies that stretch across the next few chapters of the book of Isaiah. But some of the prophecies in the collection speak of terrible judgement – God's judgements against Judah and Jerusalem. These form a bleak and gloomy list of the faults and failures of the people of Judah and especially of the city of Jerusalem. And they predict the terrible things that will surely befall the people as a result. In all of them, Isaiah warns of God's judgement, and urges God's people to return to following the ways of the LORD.

But also in the midst of that bleak and gloomy list, Isaiah preaches a message of hope. He tells of his vision of the LORD in the temple, high and lifted up, when one of the seraphim came down and touched his mouth with a live coal and took away his guilt and sin. He tells of the people who walked in darkness seeing a great light and

rejoicing, and the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood being burned, and of a child being born for us, who would be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. He foretells the day when the wolf would live with the lamb, and the leopard with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child would lead them.

And in fact, right at the start of his collection of prophecies of judgement, he proclaims a message of hope. In 2:1-5, Isaiah sees God's judgement coming to an end, and God's faithful city, Jerusalem, being raised up above everything else to accommodate all the nations of the world. He sees the day coming when all the nations would come in search of the word of God. The result of this would be a world of peace, a world without war, a world where people will *beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks*.

Back to that thought again: We are waiting for Christ, not for Christmas. In Matthew 24, Jesus is answering questions from his disciples about what the signs of his coming would be, and when *the end of the age* would happen – Matthew 24:33. Some of the signs that Jesus talks about sound like some of the grimmer predictions that Old Testament prophets made, Isaiah among them.

However, Jesus cautions against speculation about when it will happen – *about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father* Matthew 24:36, so speculation is pointless. But he warns that when it happens, it will be with shattering suddenness: *as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man* Matthew 24:38.

So rather than waste time speculating about it and what it will be like, he tells his followers to remember the *days of Noah*. In those days, when the flood came, people were too preoccupied with *eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage* to notice God's judgment till it was upon them. The danger that Jesus warns about is that people will be as oblivious to his coming as the people were to the coming flood in Noah's time. So Jesus warns people to be prepared, because *the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour* Matthew 24:44.

Where is the hope in all of this for today, the Sunday of hope?

Back to that thought again: we are waiting for Christ, not for Christmas. Our hope is and continues to be in Jesus Christ, whose coming we prepare to celebrate and whose coming again we hope for. When? Where? How? We do not know – we cannot know. But we do look forward to it in hope.

In his commentary on this passage in *Feasting on the Word*, David Bartlett writes:

The serenity prayer, usually attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr, asks us to accept the things we cannot change. Sometimes it is even harder to acknowledge the facts we cannot know; yet with that acceptance can come a kind of serenity. If Jesus is hopeful as he waits for a consummation he himself does not fully know, surely we can learn our hope from him ... All our hope is founded in God.