

Advent 1: Our wait begins “Is your headlamp turned on?”

Cindy Voth

December 1, 2019

Text: Isaiah 2:1-5

This morning we officially begin our journey through Advent. During this liturgical season of the church we ponder once again the great mystery of the incarnation when God came near to us in the form of a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. At the same time we also remember our calling to expectantly wait for the return of Jesus.

I wonder, how many of you would say that you like waiting? How many of you just get excited about the prospect of waiting? I suspect that many of you are like me, and I rather dread waiting. My internal speed is fast, which doesn't lend itself well to slowing down, and waiting - especially if that waiting is beyond my control. I also live with four children who daily demonstrate that it is not in our nature to enjoy waiting. As we wait we grow impatient, our anxiety levels might rise, we try tactics to speed things up, or we pray that time passes more quickly! Or, if we are dreading what we are waiting for sometimes we pray for time to pass more slowly to delay the arrival of what we are waiting for.

Advent is all about waiting. Advent is all about preparing while we wait. Advent is all about fully living in the now while preparing while we wait. During this particular season of Advent we will join other Mennonite Churches across in the United States and Canada in exploring this question of, “What are you waiting for?” Throughout Advent we will direct this question in three different ways. We will begin by asking this question to God, “God, what are YOU waiting for?” We will then ask it to ourselves, “What am I waiting for?” And finally we will ask it to the congregation, “What are WE waiting for?”

This morning then we ask this question to God – “God, what are you waiting for?” We ask this question as we consider the current realities of our lives and world today. We ask this

question with heavy hearts full of lament of discord, division, and death. We look around and are perplexed and find the situations maddening and wonder God, what are you waiting for? Is this not the time to break in anew and start a new Advent of new beginnings and possibilities? God, is this not the time that we need a new vision for how to move forward? God, it is out of our distress and pain and fear and angst that we cry out on this first Sunday of Advent, “What are you waiting for?”

Our text comes from the Prophet Isaiah. Isaiah’s world, not that different in some respects from our current context, was a world familiar with terror and war. They too were familiar with hate, unrest, violence, destruction, and fear. It is within that context, which strikingly resembles our own, that Isaiah delivers this vision of a world that is filled with and founded upon shalom. God’s peace. If we backed up to chapter one we would read Isaiah’s assessment of how things are going. This is a sinful nation, ones that have turned their backs on God, engaged in evil assemblies, whose hands are full of blood. Out of this context of disarray Isaiah shares the vision he has concerning Judah and Jerusalem. In the midst of war, unrest, lack of peace, violence, and destruction Isaiah stands up and declares, “I see a vision of a different way.” “If we are to follow in the way of God’s heart things can be different. We can be different. In fact relationships between countries can be different. The world, under the Lordship of Yahweh, can and will be different.”

Isaiah’s image begins with this key eschatological phrase “in the last days.” It is not a vision that Isaiah thought would happen that day, or even the next. Instead it is a vision that describes a time that is coming, a time that God’s people both then and now are desperately waiting for.

Back to Isaiah's vision we read of the centrality of worship of One God, in One location, by many people from diverse backgrounds and nations. Together they will gather on the mountain of the Lord to be taught by God so that they might walk in God's path after God's heart. In addition to being taught how to walk in God's path, people from every nation will experience God serving as their judge as God settles disputes for many peoples. From that process the people, those from every nation, will pick up their swords. The swords were their prominent image of warfare and protection. One could argue that Isaiah's vision for today would have people picking up their guns, their war missiles, their drone warfare devices.

In his vision Isaiah says they will pick up their swords and refashion and repurpose them into plowshares – an image of agriculture and provision. These same people will take up their spears, used in battles, and refashion and repurpose them to be used as pruning hooks. Instead of something sharp meant to wound or kill, they will transform the spear into a device meant to tend to plants to allow for further growth and greater yields of crops.

Neither this passage nor this image is a new concept for Anabaptist. We as Anabaptists have gravitated toward this passage to help to articulate our peace theology and pacifistic stance. In our 1995 Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective this vision from Isaiah is called the original vision of peace and justice.¹ The images it evokes are striking and inspiring as they give a clear picture of the transformation that occurs when one has come to the mountain of the Lord, received teaching, and experienced a call to live and act and help usher in God's shalom. The response is to stop studying for war, and to stop creating additional swords or spears or guns or weapons of mass destruction. The response is to refashion, repurpose the tools at our disposal to become agents and tools of peace.

Isaiah continues his vision by sharing that within this image nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore. What a glorious, refreshing, hope-filled, peace evoking image! I don't know about you, but studying this text this week in light of our currently realities made me want to pray that those last days are sooner rather than later. What a difference this vision was from the current experience in Isaiah's days, as well as from our realities today in 2019. As we hold this vision then we find ourselves asking God, "God, what are you waiting for?!!" It is as if we can scarcely believe that God is seeing all this and is not yet moved to action.

Back in April some of us had the opportunity to attend a gathering with Shane Claiborne and Michael Martin at the event called "Beating Guns" during which they transformed a gun into a garden tool. Their presentation grew out a book that they wrote together "Beating Guns: Hope for People Who are Weary of Violence." Today on the first Sunday of Advent, sitting with the vision from Isaiah, I think that we can agree that we too are people who are weary of violence and hatred. I wonder, can we also hear Isaiah's vision for us today? Can we join in ushering this vision of turning our swords into plows? Can we refashion our weapons into tools to foster growth and connection? I suspect that many of us do not own swords, spears, and guns. And yet I believe that we each are called to join in refashioning our weapons of war.

In their book Claiborne and Miller write that "The call to turn swords into plows is as much about transforming our way of life as it is about transforming a gun into a garden tool... The hard thing about transforming a life, like transforming metal, is that it requires work, sweat, heat, and constant attention."ⁱⁱ "Changing swords to plows is about the holy, sacramental work of transforming hearts as much as it is about transforming metal."ⁱⁱⁱ

Claiborne and Martin describe the process that the metal has to undergo to be transformed into a garden tool. They teach that

You have to add some heat – a little more than two thousand degrees of controlled flame. If it's too hot, the steel melts or burns off. If it's too cold, the steel cracks under the hammer. There is a happy medium range of heat where the magic happens – where transformation takes place – and it's a beautiful glowing orange... (They ask the question) How much did the prophets Micah and Isaiah know about blacksmithing when they both called their audiences to transform the metal tools of death into the tools of life, to beat swords into plows and spears into pruning hooks? We don't know if they had spent much time at the forge, but they surely knew heat is required. Fire refines; it burns away impurities. Our deepest growth often comes as we rise from crisis or trauma or a heated moment in our lives. The prophets knew that with a little holy fire metal can be reshaped – and so can people. They knew weapons that kill can be transformed – and so can people who kill. The prophets of old were not so much fortune-tellers as they were provocateurs of the imagination. They weren't trying to predict the future. They were trying to change the present. They invite us to dream of the world as it could be and not just accept the world as it is. That takes faith...

Some will say we are idealists if we talk of peace in a world of war. But faith is about believing in what we hope for and about being certain of what we do not yet see. Faith is all about not letting the current reality hijack the future. Faith refuses to accept the world as it is and insists on moving the world toward what it should be... And we can begin by telling the truth about the world as it is now and reimagining how this world could be a better, safer, and more beautiful place. We can begin reimagining our world by telling the stories of deep lament, of lives lost. Then, through the prophetic hope that we have, we can transform metal – and the world. Hope makes us live differently, unsatisfied with the way things are, and it gives us the audacity to believe they can be different.^{iv}

Provocateurs of the imagination, carrying hope, and trusting in faith that life can be different. As we enter Advent how are we also able to enter into Isaiah's vision? Perhaps though you find yourself thinking, "Well, that is a lovely vision. However, it is so very far from our current experience, and honestly hard to imagine that it could ever come to be, so thanks Isaiah for that nice image. We'll just tuck it away and perhaps consider it again on a rainy day, but really Isaiah? There is no way! It's hopeless."

To respond to that I would ask that you look again with me at verse five. Here Isaiah concludes the word of this vision with an invitation to the house of Jacob. He says, "Come, house of Jacob, (and I add, Come, house of Waterford) let us walk in the light of the Lord." It is

as if Isaiah is saying, come, it is not hopeless. Come, make a choice today to be part of the creating and unfolding of this vision. Come, be diligent about where and how you are walking. Come, turn from darkness, war, violence, fear and walk in the light, in the way of God's heart, in the way of peace. As we sit with this calling we also ratchet up our intensity as we cry out to God, "God, what are you waiting for?"

Now time for a confession. This week I really struggled with how to end this sermon. I like things wrapped up nice and tidy. I don't like waiting. I also thrive when someone gives me practical and tangible ways to live out a sermon. And this week I was tempted to run there. To move faster and further to avoid the angst and anxiety I was experiencing. I didn't want to wait, and it didn't feel like enough to just ask the question to God, "God, what are you waiting for?" And then dear Pastor Katie reminded me. "Cindy, it is really okay to leave us sitting in our waiting and our questioning to God. It is just the beginning of Advent." Wise words, Katie.

So I end by inviting us as we enter Advent to hold Isaiah's vision for the day to come, and hold our calling to walk in the ways of God, and hold our heartfelt questioning to God, "God, what are you waiting for?" This Advent it is my prayer that God might surprise us, surround us, and break in anew this season of Advent. I join you in our waiting. May it be so.

Amen.

ⁱ *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Herald Press: Scottdale, Pennsylvania), 81-82.

ⁱⁱ Shane Claiborne and Michael Martin, *Beating Guns: Hope for People Who are Weary of Violence* (Brazos Press: Grand Rapids, Michigan), 22-26.

ⁱⁱⁱ Claiborne and Martin, *Beating Guns*, 30.

^{iv} Claiborne and Martin, *Beating Guns*, 19-22.