

Hope

Isaiah 2:1-5

Advent 1, 2011 (November 27, 2011)

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

In 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.

Many 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.
He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning-hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.

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

+++

Today, on this first Sunday in Advent, we lit the candle of hope.

Some people are afraid to hope. In one of my favorite movies, set in a Maine prison in the 1940's, a character named 'Red' chastises his new prison mate for putting too much stock in hope. "Let me tell you something," he says, "hope is a dangerous thing. Hope can drive a man insane. It's got not use on the inside...you better get that into your head."

Later, the prison mate – named Andy Dufrane – responds: “Remember Red, hope is a good thing. Maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies.”¹

What do you find yourself hoping for this Advent?

I find myself hoping that my two new children and my very pregnant wife will be healthy and happy after delivery.

This week I found myself hoping that our congress would get their act together and figure a way out of long-term debt crisis.

Maybe you find yourself hoping that this year, the Advent and Christmas season will finally bring about reconciliation within your family.

Maybe you find yourself hoping that the pain of grief, or disappointment will finally subside.

Or, maybe you are tired of hope – because you’ve tried it before and it left you empty. Because you said your prayers; you surrendered your trust – and nothing changed.

Hope is a dangerous thing.

This morning, we read one of Isaiah’s prophecies about the future. Prophets like Isaiah spend much of their time describing a future that does not yet exist. They point to the kingdom that God promises – but it is a kingdom that we only catch glimpses of...if we are lucky.

Prophets like Isaiah wrote about hope. Jesus – who is the fulfillment of the prophets – embodies hope. And if you think the kind of hope that you and I have is dangerous – try to wrap your head around the magnitude of biblical hope.

In Isaiah’s vision, the nations stream to the mountain of God – not because they are coerced, or to be converted – but to seek instruction from God’s law.

¹ Dialogue from “The Shawshank Redemption” (1994)

In Isaiah's vision, once the nations have been instructed in God's law, there is such understanding that the need for conflict and division and violence and destruction cease.

In Isaiah's vision, the people of the world look down at their instruments of war and finally recognize their utter uselessness and transform them into instruments used to plant and to harvest.

Think about how dangerous it is to hope for such a thing. To put your trust in a God who promises such a thing – all the while conflicts rage in Afghanistan, Somalia, Egypt, and our own city streets.

Hope like that almost sounds like it has no use in the real world. It sounds impossible. A recipe for failure.

And it is – without a God who makes a pathway in the desert. Without a God who renders tombs empty. Without a God of resurrection – who creates possibility from the impossible.

But since you and I believe in such a God – and are loved by such a God – and are claimed by such a God – and are called to lead a life worthy of being called God's children – we hold onto hope past the point what makes sense to the rest of the world.

For we walk – not by sight, but by faith...in the light of the Lord who followed Hope's dangerous path right to cross – and who bids us to follow.

Amen.