

Expectations for The Advent

Isaiah 2:1-5

What are you talking to people about these days? Think for just a minute about the conversations you have had with people in the last couple of weeks. Conversations around the holiday season, starting with Thanksgiving and going through New Year's Day, might cover your travel plans, sharing recipes, planning for big meals or parties or family gatherings, shopping, and, if you hang out with the crowd I hang out with for a while, college football. You might also talk about Christmas presents – either what you want or what you want to find for gifts. In groups with family and friends, you might find yourself reminiscing about Christmases past. You may have already heard someone say that they will be glad when this season is over. I've been guilty of being really hard on people who say that because I assume, which is dangerous, that they are anxious for it to be over because they are so caught up in the secular pressures of the events and are just stressed out by it all. What I have often failed to acknowledge is that many people dread Thanksgiving and Christmas and many other kinds of events where it seems like everyone else is celebrating because these times serve as glaring reminders to them of those who are not present – people close to them who have died, or are far away for all sorts of reasons. There is a very real sense of loss when a chair is empty, and we need to be respectful and understanding about that, and find the right time and right way to share the extreme comfort of the presence of God into that person's life. That is our mission as people of God.

But I suspect that what we are really missing in the conversations and the events is the right concept of Advent. It is very unlikely that any conversation you have had recently about this holiday season outside the church context has used the word "Advent". If you did use it in some other context, how would you respond if asked what "Advent" means? The dictionary definitions start with reference to this four-week period on the calendar preceding Christmas Day, but the secular definition actually works better for us: "the arrival of something important or awaited". That's what Advent needs to be about – our expectation for the arrival of something important or awaited. We celebrate Christmas as the fulfilled prophesy for the arrival of the Messiah, but we should be people of Advent all year long, all the time, as we are expecting the arrival of His coming again. How can we get there?

We will be turning to the prophet Isaiah for this Advent season to help us create and sustain that sense of expectation and anticipation, and to help us learn what exactly it is that we are expecting. All of what we learned in the long study of the Gospel of Luke, including the theme of Jesus Friend of Sinners, informs what we learn here about Advent. We look back into the prophecies and teachings of Isaiah through the lens of the life and ministry and death and resurrection of Jesus, and we look forward to His coming and His coming again through the lens of the prophets. It is all woven together in a seamless whole Word of God.

Early in Isaiah's time, the city of Jerusalem found itself surrounded and under siege from the Assyrians. The same Assyrians who had already conquered and dispersed the Northern Kingdom of Israel were now at the gates of Jerusalem. But even as Isaiah delivered some very direct and very harsh messages to the people and especially the leadership of Jerusalem and the Southern Kingdom of Judah about the consequences of their disobedience of God, God gave Isaiah a vision for what The Advent, The Coming of the Day of the Lord, would be like.

READ Isaiah 2:1-5

This vision that God gave to Isaiah turned what the people of Jerusalem thought of themselves upside down in a least two significant ways.

First, at the moment, they were not all that interested in being a people of justice and peace. They had the Assyrians camped right outside, and they were looking for war-time leadership. But God wanted them to see what was beyond all that, to see that there was more, to recognize that where they were was a long way from where God wanted them to be. Doesn't that sound like stuff we should hear? There is more, there is a time and a place beyond this that God wants us to envision – and not just as some distant future wishful thinking sort of vision, but a vision of what life under the leadership of God could be like right now. The expectation of Advent is not about some vague dream-land... it is about life in the kingdom of God that John the Baptist said was at hand, and that Jesus said was now here. Here, now, when we choose to live under God's reign as our Lord and King.

But maybe the most jarring thing about this particular message to the people of Jerusalem was that this message completely inverted their sense of their place as the people of God. It had been God's express plan for the people of Israel for them to be instruments of

God's love and grace to the world in a way that would draw the whole world to God. God had laid out a way of living for them that would make them different from the world around them... different in ways that would cause the rest of the world to want to know why. Rather than claiming those differences and claiming the commission from God to be a light to the nations, Israel had chosen to become more and more like the world around them and the differences had faded. They relied on political alliances and military strength for security instead of relying on God. They took on the pagan worship practices of other peoples, and were just going through the motions of ritual and liturgy in worship of God. They set aside God's law for dealing fairly and compassionately with each other, and it was every man for himself. They found God's directions for treating the disadvantaged and poor and outcast inconvenient, and justice for those outside the mainstream was not to be had. The message of the first chapter of Isaiah is something like "Ok, if you want to be just like all those other people, then I, God, will treat you that way. There will be no protection, no special treatment, no special relationship. You will have the life you choose."

The consequences are described in this vision of Isaiah's. Jerusalem will be raised up to the highest place, but it will be the other nations, not Israel, who will be streaming to it to claim their place in God's kingdom. It will be the other nations, not Israel, who will long for God's teaching and direction, who will seek out God's guidance for right relationship with Him and live in the peace and justice of God's reign. From that place, the Word of God will be proclaimed, and somebody, some people will call out to Israel, the "house of Jacob", come home. Leadership will come from people who have heard and responded to God, and the complacent and self-centered will be left behind. The complacent and self-centered will still be left behind.

Are we ready to claim the kind of Advent that turns our world upside down, that shakes us out of our complacency and challenges us to repentance and a life of justice and mercy and peace? The message here from Isaiah is that we should always be expecting and anticipating that kind of Advent, that arrival of something important, because that is the reality of the coming of the Lord.

The kingdom of joy and justice and peace is coming. Expect The Advent, and claim your place in it.