

The Future That Is Coming To Us

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Isaiah 2:1-5; Matthew 24:36-44
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The church is an odd community in the world. At our best, the church has always been an odd community in the world, a community following an alternative path to the dominant priorities that the world promotes. You might even say that the church exists to be such an odd, alternative community – salt of the earth, leaven for the loaf – and if the salt has lost its taste, if the church is no longer offering such an alternative to the dominant values and modes of consciousness in the world, then the church has lost its bearings.

One sign of the church's oddness is that today, churches around the world are saying, "Happy New Year." In the rest of the world, people assume that the new year is still more than a month away on January 1, after the upcoming shopping season. But the church does not organize its sense of time around the markets, but around the life of Jesus. The church begins its sense of time around the coming of Jesus, for whom we are now beginning our preparation.

In Advent, we look back and recall the 1st coming of Jesus into the world and into our lives, when he came with mercy and truth, born vulnerably in the manger at Bethlehem. But we also look forward with anticipation and hope to the 2nd coming of Jesus into the world and into our lives. The 2nd coming is a mysterious promise, because we cannot know precisely what will happen then, but the church's essential conviction is that Christ will come again to set things right, it will be a day of justice, a day when God's purposes for all of creation are fulfilled, when all of creation will reflect the grace, the love, and the will of God. Such a day is a day for which the church has longed from the very beginning, and for which we long today.

Our two texts speak of that day, and they speak both of what we may anticipate about that day, and of what we cannot know. "About that day and hour," reads Matthew 24, "no one knows." No one knows when Jesus' return will happen. No one. No one knows when all these things will happen. No one knows. "Neither the angels of heaven, nor even the Son." According to Matthew 24, Jesus does not even know when his return will happen. "Only the Father." Only the Father knows when all these things will happen. The text seems to say, so don't spend your time or energy worrying about when it will happen. And don't spend your time or energy being intimidated by other people who want to tell you when it will happen, so that they can get you to do something that serves their agendas. Just live your life in humble trust and gratitude and service, and allow the Father to take care of everything else. The world assumes

it's best to live with control, but the church knows that control is a path that leads to death, and that trust is the path to follow.

Though it is not given to us to know anything like a timetable about when these things will happen, there are some things that are given to us to know. "In days to come," Isaiah promises, the nations of the world will stream to Jerusalem. Isaiah 2 is an evangelical text. The world, according to Isaiah 2, will stream to Jerusalem, also known as Zion. Now that was an odd claim for a couple of reasons. First, Jerusalem and Israel, in the time of the Bible, was consistently caught between the mighty empires of the world. Assyria, Egypt, Babylon, Persia. These superpowers surrounded Israel, they besieged Jerusalem, they intimidated and enslaved and deported the Jewish community. That was what passed for normal in the ancient world. But in days to come, according to Isaiah, the swaggering power of empire will be reversed, the first will be last, the last will be first, and the imperial powers will come to Jerusalem, not to besiege it, but as students ready to learn. "Let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, that the Lord may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." Talk about an odd turn of events.

But the 2nd reason this was an odd claim for Isaiah to make in chapter 2, is that Isaiah has just finished excoriating Jerusalem for its awful, sinful ways in chapter 1. "How the faithful city has become a whore!" reads verse 21. "She that was full of justice – now murderers!" "Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe. They do not defend the orphan, and the widow's cause does not come before them." Jerusalem has become a corrupt city. So our heads are spinning when just a few verses later, Jerusalem has become the highest of all the mountains of the world.

What chapter 2 makes clear is that Jerusalem's surprising elevation is not because the people of Israel are awesome. The reason the nations are streaming to Jerusalem – the same reason people will connect, and stay connected, with the church – is not because of how perfect people of faith are. Those of us in the church will disappoint you and let you down just as much as anyone else. The reason the world will stream to the community of faith is because of the life-giving, healing presence of God that is encountered here - sometimes because of things we do, but just as often in spite of things we do. God's presence is encountered through the church. The church is not the *only* place where people encounter God, but the church is a central part of God's strategy for being made known to the world. When we are doing something other than bearing witness to God, making the presence of God known in this community, we have lost our reason for being.

Advent is the recognition that wealth, popularity, and power – all of the things we spend so much energy trying to accumulate - cannot finally deliver the peace, justice, and well-being that we crave. Only the path of faith, hope, love, vulnerability, mercy, and neighborly compassion can provide the shalom that we crave and that the

world craves. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. When we follow him, he leads us into fullness of life. When we follow him, we build up the common good, not our own personal greed, because he is building up the common good. When we follow him, he teaches us his ways and we learn to walk in God's paths, just as Isaiah 2 promised.

All of this makes the church a strange creature. When the church follows Jesus, we are still in the world, but we are not of the world. As the Southern novelist Flannery O'Connor wrote, "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you odd." When we follow Jesus, we may make dramatic changes in our jobs or where we live, but we may very well continue to live and serve in the same places where we have been. But when we follow Jesus, we will do so differently. We will bend the arcs of the institutions we serve away from their self-preservation, as though the mere survival of the institution were the highest good, and towards serving and building up the well-being of our neighborhoods, and especially the poorest and most vulnerable of our neighbors. We will do things like engage in small, steady acts of kindness and generosity – like our giving manger project. I was talking with one of my mentors recently, and we were talking about the intense hostility and resentment that our society seems to be marinating in these days. We talked about how the church is never immune to that criticism and hostility, but how it can come inside the church as well, even though the church – in our life together and in our mission work in the community - should be an antidote to that kind of animosity. My mentor remembered how, when she was a very young girl, her home church had a manger at Advent and Christmas. And they did what we're doing this year, where for every act of kindness that you did during the week, you would place a piece of straw in the manger. And then she said that her mom told her, "We want to make sure the manger is nice and fluffy for baby Jesus' bottom. So we need to do lots of acts of kindness." She said it made a difference in how they experienced Christmas that year. Our Alternative Gifts project, and our Christmas Caroling, and other activities do the same thing – they help to turn the tide of our society away from fear and meanness, towards gratitude and neighborliness. While the rest of society is telling people to look down on those who are different, to look out for yourself and those who are like you, to sequester ourselves into our little tribes, Jesus is leading his church to reach out to those who are different, to share our resources with them, and to live in trust and joy and humility.

All of this will make the church very odd, in our world of competitive acquisition and anxious violence and fearful hatred. But this is the path to well-being. And the church, at our best, has always been quite willing to be seen as odd. To God alone be the glory. Amen.