

Isiah 2:1-5 & Matthew 24:36-44

MANY YEARS AGO A FORMER PASTOR RETURNED FOR A VISIT TO THE COMMUNITY WHERE I WAS SERVING.

IN THE COURSE OF CONVERSATION HE SAID HE AND HIS WIFE WOULD LOVE TO SEE THE MANSE AGAIN SINCE IT HAD BEEN OVER 20 YEARS SINCE THEY WERE THERE.

I SAID SURE, AND ASKED WHEN THEY WOULD LIKE TO SEE IT. HE REPLIED NOW WOULD BE A GOOD TIME.

I RESPONDED- GIVE ME ABOUT 15 MINUTES. THEN I RUSHED HOME AND BEGAN TO STRAIGHTEN UP-MOSTLY BY THROWING CLUTTER IN THE CLOSETS, HOPING THEY WOULD NOT BE INTERESTING IN LOOKING AT THEM.

AN ANGLICAN BISHOP WHO'S FAMILY ALSO HAD TO HUSTLE AT THE LAST MOMENT TO STRAIGHTEN UP FOR UNEXPECTED COMPANY REFLECTED ON THE EXPERIENCE.

HE OBSERVED THAT OUR LIVES CANNOT BE STRAIGHTENED UP AS QUICKLY OR EASILY AS A MESSY HOUSE, CONSEQUENTLY WE NEED TO ALWAYS BE READY FOR CHRIST'S COMING.

ADVENT IS ALL ABOUT BEING READY FOR JESUS. THE WORD ADVENT, AS YOU MAY RECALL, MEANS "ARRIVAL".

THE SEASON IS A TIME TO LOOK BACKWARD AT WHAT GOD HAS DONE IN JESUS' FIRST ARRIVAL AS A BABY, BUT IT ALSO LOOKS FORWARD TO WHAT GOD WILL DO WHEN JESUS RETURNS.

THE PROPHET ISAIAH OFFERED WORDS OF HOPE, FOLLOWING GOD'S JUDGMENT, FOR HIS FIXING THE MESS WE HAVE MADE OF THE WORLD.

ORIGINALLY HIS WORDS WERE ADDRESSED TO THOSE LIVING IN THE DARKNESS OF THE CONSEQUENCES OF PERSONAL AND NATIONAL SIN.

HE ASSURED GOD'S PEOPLE THE DARKNESS WOULD ONE DAY BE OVERCOME BY THE LIGHT GOD WOULD PROVIDE.

THEY WERE TOLD THAT THEY SHOULD LOOK FOR AND RESPOND TO THAT LIGHT BY RETURNING TO GOD'S WAYS. THE VISION OF REMAKING SWORDS INTO PLOWSHARES WAS BROUGHT TO LIFE IN A SCULPTURE PLACED OUTSIDE THE UNITED NATIONS BUILDING IN N.Y.C.

BUT THE HOPE THE FOUNDERS OF THE U.N. HAD FOR THEIR ABILITY TO MAKE RIGHT WHAT IS WRONG CONSISTENTLY FALLS FAR SHORT OF FULFILLMENT.

AND THE TRUTH IS- NEITHER THE UN NOR ANY NATION'S GOVERNMENT, NOR EVEN THE CHURCH HERSELF CAN MAKE THAT DREAM HAPPEN.

OF COURSE, MEN AND WOMEN, AND OUR INSTITUTIONS CAN MAKE POSITIVE CHANGES IN THE TURMOIL AND TROUBLE OF OUR SIN FILLED WORLD.

HOWEVER, THE HOPE OF A LASTING WORLD PEACE NEEDS GOD'S DIRECT INTERVENTION.

CHRISTIANS UNDERSTAND ISAIAH'S WORDS SPEAK OF THE FULFILLMENT OF THIS HOPE THROUGH JESUS CHRIST.

FOR IT IS IN HIM ALL NATIONS AND PEOPLES OF THE WORLD WILL BE JOINED- AND THUS WILL MAKE PEACE WITH ONE ANOTHER.

IN FACT THE THIRD VERSE OF THE HYMN- "O COME, O COME, EMMANUEL" EXPRESSES THIS HOPE:

"O COME, DESIRE OF NATIONS, BIND, ALL PEOPLES IN ONE HEART AND MIND; BID ENVY, STRIFE, AND DISCORD, CEASE; FILL THE WHOLE WORLD WITH HEAVEN'S PEACE."

HOWEVER, THE READING FROM MATTHEW'S GOSPEL, CONCERNING CHRIST'S WORDS TO HIS DISCIPLES ABOUT THE END TIMES, SPEAKS MORE OF TURMOIL THAN OF PEACE.

THE WORDS OF JESUS ABOUT OF THE FUTURE AROSE IN RESPONSE TO COMMENTS SOME OF THE TWELVE MADE TO HIM.

THEY POINTED OUT TO JESUS THE GRAND NATURE OF THE TEMPLE, AND THE OTHER BUILDINGS IN THE TEMPLE COMPLEX IN JERUSALEM.

THE SAVIOR TOLD THEM, AS RECORDED IN MATTHEW 24:2. "I TELL YOU, NOT ONE STONE WILL BE LEFT HERE UPON ANOTHER, ALL WILL BE THROWN DOWN."

LATER THEY QUESTIONED HIM ABOUT HIS WORDS. JESUS TOLD THEM TO BEWARE OF BEING LED ASTRAY BY THOSE WHO CLAIM TO KNOW GOD'S TIMING.

THE SAVIOR WARNED THEM, THAT BEFORE THE COMING DESTRUCTION THERE WOULD BE MANY SIGNS, AND MANY PEOPLE WOULD BE LED ASTRAY-SO THEY MUST STAY ALERT.

HE SPOKE OF THE COMING DARKNESS AND OTHER EVENTS THAT WOULD TAKE PLACE BEFORE THE SON OF MAN WOULD COME TO THE EARTH IN POWER, GLORY, AND WITH ANGELS.

THEN IN MATTHEW 24:34, JESUS ADDED, "TRULY I TELL YOU THIS GENERATION WILL NOT PASS AWAY BEFORE ALL THESE THINGS HAVE TAKEN PLACE."

THAT PROPHECY INDEED WAS FULFILLED IN PART BEFORE THE LAST OF THAT GENERATION DIED, WHEN IN 66 AD THE MAJORITY OF THE JEWS REVOLTED AGAINST ROME.

SOME PEOPLE DIED-OR WERE CARRIED AWAY TO SLAVERY, WHILE OTHERS REMAINED.

AND THEN JESUS' WARNING ABOUT ALL THE BUILDINGS THAT MADE UP THE TEMPLE COMPLEX CAME TRUE IN 70 AD.

IN THAT YEAR THE ROMAN LEGIONS FINALLY OVERPOWERED THE JEWS AND ALL THE BUILDINGS IN THE TEMPLE COMPLEX WERE COMPLETELY DESTROYED, EXCEPT A SMALL PORTION OF THE OUTER WALL.

THIS PASSAGE FROM MATTHEW HOWEVER, SPEAKS ABOUT MORE THAN THAT EVENT OF LONG AGO.

IT ALSO LOOKS TOWARD THE GREAT EVENT OF CHRIST'S- SECOND PHYSICAL COMING INTO THE WORLD-IN ALL POWER AND GLORY, TO JUDGE THE LIVING AND THE DEAD.

THIS IS THE EVENT CHRISTIANS STILL LOOK FOR, AND IT IS WHY ADVENT PULLS US IN TWO DIRECTIONS- BACKWARDS TO CHRIST'S BIRTH, AND FORWARD TO HIS SECOND COMING.

AS SOME LINES OF AN ADVENT HYMN INQUIRERS: "LORD, HER WATCH THY CHURCH IS KEEPING: WHEN SHALL EARTH THY RULE OBEY?"

WHEN SHALL END THE NIGHT OF WEEPING? WHEN SHALL BREAK THE PROMISED DAY?"

IT WAS ABOUT THAT PROMISED DAY AS WELL- THE SAVIOR SOUGHT TO CONVEY TO HIS FOLLOWERS THE IMPORTANCE OF THEM WATCHING AND WAITING, AND BEING PREPARED.

AND JESUS DID SO WHILE EMPHASIZING THAT HE DID NOT KNOW WHEN THAT FINAL DAY OF LIFE ON EARTH -AS WE KNOW IT WILL COME.

OF COURSE THAT HAS NOT STOPPED PEOPLE EVER SINCE CHRIST'S DEATH, RESURRECTION, AND ASCENSION INTO HEAVEN FROM MAKING PREDICTIONS ABOUT THE END TIMES.

MOSTLY DOING SO SEEMS TO BE A WASTE OF TIME, ESPECIALLY SINCE JESUS SPECIFICALLY SAID NOT EVEN HE KNEW.

FURTHERMORE, JESUS TOLD HIS FOLLOWERS TO BE PREPARERS FOR HIS RETURN, NOT PREDICTORS OF WHEN IT WILL OCCUR.

THERE IS HOWEVER ONE THING ALL CHRISTIANS CAN KNOW ABOUT WHEN JESUS WILL RETURN-AND THAT IS:

JUST LIKE GOD SENT HIS SON INTO THE WORLD THE FIRST TIME-SO ALSO JESUS WILL COME AGAIN WHEN GOD- THE FATHER- SENDS HIM.

SEVERAL YEARS AGO AN ADVENT DEVOTION APPEARED IN A CLARION P.A. NEWSPAPER THAT IS RELEVANT TO THIS TOPIC ABOUT CHRIST'S ARRIVAL.

HERE IS A PORTION OF WHAT WAS WRITTEN THERE ABOUT CHRIST'S BIRTH:

"...WHAT WE CAN NEVER FORGET...IS THAT THIS IS NOT OUR STORY, IT IS GOD'S STORY.

WHAT WE CAN NEVER FORGET IS THAT WHICH WE ARE PREPARING TO CELEBRATE IS NOT OUR DOING, BUT GOD'S DOING."

THE SAME IS TRUE, I BELIEVE, CONCERNING THE SECOND COMING. IT IS UNDER GOD'S CONTROL AND NOT OURS.

WE CAN NEITHER QUICKEN, NOR DELAY THE RETURN OF THE SAVIOR; NOR SHOULD WE TRY TO DO EITHER.

INSTEAD WE OUGHT TO BE DOING WHAT JESUS COMMANDED HIS FOLLOWERS TO DO: "KEEP ALERT...YOU MUST BE READY! THE SON OF MAN IS COMING AT A TIME YOU DON'T EXPECT."

BUT WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR US TO KEEP ALERT-IF WE ARE NOT SUPPOSE TO MAKE PREDICTIONS ABOUT WHETHER NOR NOT THE END IS ACTUALLY NEAR?

WE ARE, AS CHRIST'S DISCIPLES, SUPPOSED TO BE LIVING AS HIS BODY, THAT IS-HIS PRESENCE IN THE WORLD.

AND PERHAPS ONE OF THE REASONS-THERE HAVE BEEN IN THE PAST, AND CONTINUE TO BE IN THE PRESENT SO MANY SIGNS THAT LOOK AS IF THE END IS NEAR, IS CHRISTIANS SO OFTEN GET LAZY OR COMPLACENT.

THE SIGNS, AT LEAST IN PART, COULD BE SENT TO GET US MOVING AGAIN AND CONTINUING THE WORK OF CHRIST WE HAVE BEEN SAVED AND CALLED TO DO.

FOR EXAMPLE: SPREADING HIS LOVE IN THE WORLD, AND SPREADING OF THE GOSPEL MESSAGE OF SALVATION THROUGH CHRIST.

THOSE ACTIONS, INDEED, ARE ASPECTS OF THE LORD'S WORK WE NEED TO BE CAUGHT DOING WHENEVER JESUS RETURNS.

THUS SIGNS OF THE END TIMES OUGHT TO NEITHER PROVOKE US TO FEAR, NOR PROVIDE US WITH AN EXCUSE TO STOP SERVING AS CHRIST'S AMBASSADORS IN THE WORLD.

INSTEAD THEY ARE SENT TO INSPIRE US TO WORK MORE DILIGENTLY AGAINST EVIL.

ONE EXAMPLE OF THE DANGER OF CHRISTIANS NOT DOING CHRIST'S WORK, BECAUSE THEY THINK JESUS WILL SOON COME AGAIN IS FOUND IN GERMANY DURING THE NAZI ERA.

WHILE THE THEOLOGIAN AND LUTHERAN CHURCH LEADER DIETRICH BONHOEFFER WAS IN A NAZI PRISON FOR TAKING PART IN A PLOT TO ASSASSINATE HITLER, HE WAS VISITED BY SOME COLLEAGUES.

THEY ASKED HIM WHY HE TOOK SUCH RISKS TO FIGHT THE NAZI'S SINCE ALL THE SIGNS INDICATE JESUS WOULD SOON RETURN.

LISTEN TO HIS RESPONSE TO THOSE WHO SAT BACK TO WAIT FOR GOD TO ACT, INSTEAD OF FIGHTING AGAINST THE FORCES OF SATAN THEMSELVES.

HE DECLARED- "IF JESUS RETURNS TOMORROW, THEN TOMORROW I'LL REST FROM MY LABOR, BUT TODAY I HAVE WORK TO DO. I MUST CONTINUE THE STRUGGLE UNTIL IT IS FINISHED."

SHORTLY BEFORE THE END OF WORLD WAR BONHOEFFER'S STRUGGLE WAS FINISHED WHEN THE NAZI'S EXECUTED HIM.

BUT THE LESSON OF HIS CHOICE LIVES ON. IT SHOWS CHRISTIANS TODAY, WE NEED TO LEAVE THE SECOND COMING WHERE IT BELONGS IN GOD'S HANDS.

OUR DUTY IS TO FOLLOW JESUS' COMMAND TO SERVE AS HIS PRESENCE IN THE WORLD.

AND SO ADVENT CAN BE UNDERSTOOD AS A TIME OF RENEWAL OF THIS CALL TO SERVICE, NOT JUST UNTIL CHRISTMAS BUT BEYOND.

ACTUALLY THE CALL TO SERVICE REMAINS IN EFFECT FOR EVERY SEASON OF EVERY YEAR, FROM NOW -UNTIL GOD, IN ONE WAY OR ANOTHER, RELIEVES EACH CHRISTIAN OF HIS OR HER DUTY.

MAY THE HOLY SPIRIT INSPIRE US TO DO CHRIST'S WILL, TO BE JESUS' PRESENCE IN THE WORLD.

MAY WE RECEIVE THE STRENGTH AND WISDOM WE NEED TO FIGHT EVIL- BY THE CHOICES WE MAKE IN OUR LIVES, AS WELL AS BY HOW WE WORSHIP GOD, AND ALSO HOW TREAT OTHERS.

LET US PRAY:

LOVING GOD, WE SEEK YOU IN- THE LIGHT AND THE DARK, THE SILENCE AND THE SOUNDS, THE FULLNESS, AND THE EMPTINESS OF THIS ADVENT SEASON.

FILL OUR HEARTS WITH HOPE FOR YOUR COMING, LOVE FOR THOSE WHO ARE MOST IN NEED, AND FAITH IN YOUR PROMISES.

MAY THIS TIME OF PREPARATION HELP US CELEBRATE THE BIRTH OF YOUR SON WITH DEEP GRATITUDE AND ABUNDANT JOY. WE ASK THIS IN THE NAME OF JESUS, THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD. AMEN.

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