

**Advent 1 + November 27, 2016**  
**Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit**  
**Isaiah 2:1-5**

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Last week, on Christ the King Sunday, we were standing on Golgotha near the end of Luke's gospel as the crucified Jesus was mocked by religious leaders, Roman soldiers, and even by a common criminal who was hanging next to him.

This mockery by the forces of the world is familiar. As Christians, we are called to a way of life that opens us up to this—being called to love our enemies, to pray for those who abuse us, to give our coat away if someone asks for it, and, oh, not only that, but to offer our shirt as well. We are called not to ask for something back if someone takes it from us. We are called to turn the other cheek. That doesn't mean just “refrain from retaliating,” as one dictionary says. It means actually offering your other cheek after the first one has been slapped.

Consider the very absurdity of it all, from the world's point of view. We are called to have faith in that which we cannot see. We are called to put all our trust in something that cannot be measured or analyzed statistically. And we are called to hope, and here is what Paul tells us about that (Rom. 8:24): “Now, hope that can be seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen?” I suppose the world could have a good laugh about that, too.

Two weeks ago, in the immediate aftermath of the election, we were also talking about hope, and the difference between hopes and wishes. Wishes, we said, describe a personal preference. Hope, on the other hand, is our utter confidence in God and God's promises, a confidence made possible by faith.

Hope seems to be in short supply these days. The Associated Press reported a few days ago that there has been a shift in recent weeks in what customers are looking for in greeting cards. One design-your-own Christmas card company has calculated that demand for the word “cheer,” which had risen 9 percent during October, fell 14 percent after the election. At the same time, demand for the less common word “peace” rose 9 percent and the demand for “hope” as a word in the Christmas card rose by 15 percent.

This may well have less to do with the outcome of the election than with wounds inflicted during the campaign that have yet to heal. After all, we were all subjected in the news media to 16 months of pretty awful stuff. Remember what it felt like on November 7 and how weary we all were? How we just wanted it to be over? And even though it is over, it kind of isn't, here in Wisconsin, as our poor state is now preparing for a recount. More weariness.

In dark days when hope is in short supply, it is good to turn to the writings of the Old Testament prophets, particularly Jeremiah and Isaiah. Some people think these riveting figures from ancient Israel were basically just fortune-tellers, predicting things to come, specifically with reference to Jesus. But the purpose of the prophetic voice is to evoke and nurture a consciousness different from that of the prevailing culture. Prophets don't deal with specific public crises; rather, they address whatever the dominant crisis in the culture is—although that may manifest itself in specific issues. They do this first by exposing the prevailing consciousness, and then by pointing people toward another time and situation toward which the community of faith can move. And the words they use were meant not so much to convey information but to inspire the imagination of readers or listeners so that those people can arrive at new realizations of their own about what things are really like and what they might someday become. That is the power of poetry, and of all

the arts—to set our imaginations on fire so that we will be able to envision a better world in which to live.

So there can be no redemption without judgment, because first the existing order must be exposed. Isaiah is writing in the late 8<sup>th</sup> century BC just as the Kingdom of Israel has been captured by Assyria, a devastating event the prophet interprets as punishment because the people have abandoned God. While our text today from Isaiah 2 contains some of the most lyrical lines of hope in the Hebrew Scriptures, we need to read those in light of what comes immediately before, in Chapter 1. There, we find some of the most brutal invective in the Old Testament. This isn't just Isaiah's wrath; it's God's own grief for his people and what has brought them to this state. The prophet heaps condemnation on Israel as a "sinful nation, people laden with iniquity, offspring who do evil, children who deal corruptly....The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot even to the head there is no soundness in it, but bruises and sores and bleeding wounds." I am weary of your new moons and festivals, he writes. You, Jerusalem, used to be faithful, but now you behave as a prostitute. You used to be righteous, now you are murderers. You all run after bribes and have no concern for widows or orphans. "I will turn my hand against you! I will smelt away your dross as with lye and remove all your alloy."

And then what? Chapter 1, verse 27: "Zion shall be redeemed by justice, and those in her who repent, by righteousness. But rebels and sinners shall be destroyed together, and those who forsake the Lord will be consumed."

So, before we can arrive at hope, we must be able to see things as they are. Our readings today from Paul and Matthew call us to this kind of watchfulness, an awareness of the way the world around us really is. Our reality near the end of 2016 is that we find ourselves not only in a contentious political climate but also gripped from many sides by violence, sin, suffering, and death.

On top of the struggles each of us contends with daily, there are so many people around the globe so much worse off. The stories of human suffering in eastern Aleppo are almost too much to bear, and on another continent, a growing number of hardworking citizens in the oil-rich country of Venezuela have little or nothing to eat and lack the most basic human services. Forces of destruction seem to keep getting the upper hand. Deep in our hearts we are overwhelmed by the power and guilt of our own sin. We feel empty and lost and wonder how faith is even possible.

But we are not alone in this world. As human beings, we were created to be relational. We were created in God's image, to live in relation to God. God's relationship toward us is that of grace, that is, one of infinite love and mercy that we do not deserve. God's grace is manifested in God's Word, through whom the universe was created, through whom God speaks and acts in human history, and who became flesh in Jesus Christ. Our relationship toward God is that of faith, a fundamental trust that orients our entire lives.

This is how faith is possible—through Jesus, God who has come to dwell with us in human form so that we can know him intimately as the incarnate expression of God's surpassing love for us. God in Christ sets us free from attachments and illusions that keep us bound in sin: "Love caused your incarnation; love brought you down to me. / Your thirst for my salvation procured my liberty," we sing in the beautiful Advent hymn "O Lord, How Shall I Meet You." God in Christ makes God's love manifest to us, here, in the midst of our messy lives. In this relationship our faith is constantly strengthened, making it possible for us to overcome all obstacles. "I can do all things in Christ, who strengthens me," Paul sings in Philippians 4.

And where there is faith, there is hope. Now we can sing, with Isaiah,

<sup>2</sup>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....

<sup>4</sup>He shall judge between the nations,  
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;  
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,  
and their spears into pruning hooks;  
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,  
neither shall they learn war any more.

Faith seeks reconciliation. If we really want healing and reconciliation in this country, then let us fling wide the doors of our heart so that the living Christ may come in. Make for him there a dwelling place, however humble. Then we will have the strength, the faith, to acknowledge before God our selfish agendas that create division, including our massive mechanisms of blame. Then we will we not only stop seeing each other as enemies because we voted differently, but can engage these former enemies in conversation. In casting your vote, you might ask each other, what were your hopes? What were your fears? Or if you couldn't bring yourself to vote at all, what was that deep anxiety all about? How can we use our differences to peel back layers of personality and conditioning to the human beings underneath that share the same deep concerns? And in doing that, how can we testify to the hope that is ours in Jesus Christ?

As we begin the journey together into Advent, let the hope of the living Christ be your guiding light through these darkening days. And be fearless in your testimony.

Amen.