

11-27-16 “In the Midst of the Present” A Reflection on Isaiah 2:1-5, First Sunday in Advent, Mark Arbisi, Christ Church, KBK

What follows I'm sure won't come as too much of a surprise to anyone—if it does I'll be concerned about you--but I've never been pregnant. Just saying. Although I do know what a “pregnant moment” is like. Someone described a “pregnant moment” as “A moment full of meaning, like the moment when something important has just been said by one and understood by the other as a moment of meaningful suspense, or anticipation, or yet hidden, new life.” So yeah, even a guy gets that. A “pregnant moment” is also an excellent description of these weeks of the Advent.

When we hear Isaiah describe a time when people everywhere “*shall beat their swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks*” we get it. It's a pregnant moment. A moment yet to be anticipated, a moment in the process of being born, a moment of radical new life that shall cry and grow and mature. We understand in Isaiah's words that there is a hidden reality that moves deep inside of us. A reality based on a universe hope that the struggles and strife and conflicts of the present shall some day be overcome, fully, finally, for good; and on that day “*nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.*” And during this present gestation period the prophet blesses us with a “pregnant moment”.

Few of us will ever have the unmitigated pleasure of reading scripture in the original languages—which means we are all the more dependent upon prayer and the Holy Spirit to illuminate God's Word and God's Will. For example take the opening four words of our lesson today: “*In the days to come...*” They sound fairly flat and empty in English, those words, don't they? But in Hebrew—OMG, so very different. Instead, we hear a prophet's pregnant words; we encounter the light of God intensifying exponentially. It has been suggested that a proper Hebrew translation of “*In the days to come...*” might be this: “*In the midst of the present...*”! How different is that? No. Not far off, distant, not a pie-in-the-sky-Pollyanna hope for people inclined to view the world through rose-colored glasses. Hardly. In the midst of now, in the midst of the world, active everywhere one with eyes to see may care to look—something living in tension today! Not a feel-good abstraction, not a possible future, not a dreamer's idle fantasy. But that which is “*in the midst of the present.*” Perhaps your heart just skipped a beat.

The great biblical scholar, Walter Brueggemann, has compared this morning's beautiful lesson from the prophet Isaiah to the “*I have a Dream Speech*” by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Martin's moving words are nothing if not anchored squarely in the midst of the present; they are nothing if not living in tension today—not some bygone era, today! Today we dream, in Martin's words now, “*even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow...[today] I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.'*”

It is precisely because that most days our lived reality is a long, long way from either Isaiah's or Martin's dream that both live in tension in the midst of the present. Yet as any mother's child will tell you, dreams do come true. Indeed, more germane, can a dream ever come true if it is not dreamed? If never dreamed it can't be a dream—best then to dream today, every day; for without dream it is hard to imagine how the future will do anything but be a carbon copy of the present, of the past.

My friends, among the countless transcendent mysteries of God—those things too marvelous for us to know—what is known of God is marvelous enough for all our needs. For this we both constantly are reminded and constantly give thanks. Today, as we step into a new Church year, into this season of anticipation and preparation, we begin with a vision which God has long ago blessed us with, a vision to dream of and to dream about; and as the prophet of old and the prophet of the sixties understood and embodied, the dream which God offers is a dream that we can accomplish, certainly live into. The world simply need not continue beating swords into swords and spears into spears; each generation need not learn war anymore. We know this but we do need our reminders. I confess that I never understood what the President-elect means by “Make America Great Again,” but I can tell you that I hope and pray that in the very least it means peace and justice and equality for everyone, Martin's “four little children,” now all grown; and that indeed, we will be a nation “where people are judged not by the color of their skin but the nature of their character.” In fact I got to tell you that if Donald's vision means anything less than that I'd really be disturbed.

There is an island off the coast of Maine—of course there are thousands of islands off the coast of Maine—but this one is called Monhegan Island. The only way to get there is to ride the ferry that departs at 7 o'clock every morning. It takes about an hour. On one such trip someone recounts the following story. “The ride over the sea was like a gorgeous sheet of glass, mirroring the clear sky. It was smooth. It made for a pleasant trip...delighting in the breeze, bathing in the light of a new day. The trip back was a different story. A front had moved in and where there was once no wind, there were now blustery, hurling, frothy winds and waves.” The person recalls, “I held up remarkably well for the first 15 minutes, but a volcano was brewing, and it wasn't on the shore. It was in the pit of my stomach. The pilot took one look at me and noticed that my face was the color of an avocado and simply told me, 'Sit down, find a point on the shoreline and focus on it.'

Of course I did...there was a sharp peak upon which there was a lighthouse. And I kept my eyes on it. As I do so, I began to visualize life on terra-firma...in a warm, dry setting. And after a while my stomach became calmer, my head cleared. I began to breathe deeply. 'I'm going to make it,' I thought with brand new assurance. And I did.”

My friends, this first **Sunday** in Advent we're reminded that the point on the shoreline before us is precisely the vision God articulated through Isaiah's “I have a dream” speech. What if we really focused on it? What a difference it may make—all the more when life brings us to a place where we're about to heave. All the more then!

Fixed on God's point on the horizon, that which has long been set before us, we indeed feel calmer and clearer and breathing is easier and the assurance of “making it” grows all the more comforting. This God has provided us so we don't sit idly by brooding in worries, entertaining our anxieties, fearing the eruption of an internal brewing volcano. Yes my friends, this is how God is uniquely blessing us no matter what fears, anxieties, frets and concerns about tomorrow we harbor, right now, in the midst of the present. Indeed, it strikes me that God does God's best work “in the midst of the present.” How very remarkable is that?

Indeed, God our God is so cool! Amen