

## **HOPE FOR A FUTURE**

### **First Sunday of Advent<sup>1</sup>**

**Church of Christ / 9301 Sheldon Road / Plymouth, MI 48170**

**Royce Dickinson, Jr. / 11.28.2004**

“Advent”—the word means “coming” or “arrival,” and the “Season of Advent” refers to this time of year when preparation is made to commemorate Christ’s first coming and to anticipate His second coming. For western Christianity, today is the first Sunday of Advent. Or, to use secular language, today is the beginning of the Christmas Season.

Advent, however, is more than merely a unique season within the year. Christmas is more than an annual grand finale by which we bring an ordinary year to a climatic close. No. No. No. Advent is an interruption and disruption of our normal year. Advent invites us to wake up from the stupor caused by the routine of daily life, and Advent invites us to awaken our hopes that so often have become dulled by the monotony of daily life. This is the season where we are at the brink of something utterly new, something long yearned for, but something that is beyond our ability to make happen. This is the season to consider life afresh in the light of new gifts God is about to give. Advent is a time to see the world through God’s eyes, to see more than what is, to see what can be.

In 1987, Nanci Griffith introduced a song that—five years later—was a smash hit for Bette Midler.

From a distance, the world looks blue and green,  
And the snow-capped mountains white.  
From a distance, the ocean meets the stream,  
And the eagle takes to flight.

From a distance, there is harmony,  
And it echoes through the land.  
It’s the voice of hope, it’s the voice of peace,  
It’s the voice of every man.

From a distance, we all have enough,  
And no one is in need.  
There are no guns, no bombs, no diseases,

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<sup>1</sup>Isa 2:1-5; Ps 122; Rom 13:11-14; Matt 24:36-44.

No hungry mouths to feed.

From a distance, we are instruments,  
Marching in a common band.  
Playing songs of hope, playing songs of peace:  
They're the songs of every man.

God is watching us, God is watching us,  
God is watching us, from a distance.

From a distance, you look like my friend,  
Even though we are at war.  
From a distance, I can't comprehend,  
What all this war is for.

From a distance, there is harmony,  
And it echoes through the land.  
It's the hope of hopes, it's the love of loves,  
It's the heart of every man.

It's the hope of hopes, it's the love of loves,  
It's the song of every man.

(Written by Julie Gold.)

Several years ago, I heard Nanci Griffith sing this song, and it touched my heart then and it touches my heart every time I hear it. Although, as Nanci herself admits, this song means something different to every ear that hears it, to me it says that God sees what this world could be and what one day—by His power—it will be.

The people of God have been hoping for a very long time. The spirit of that hope, deeply rooted in the Old Testament and revealed in the New Testament in Jesus Christ, is a hope that is persistent and persevering. It is a hope that is anchored in a God who makes good on His promises. This brings us to our Scripture text for today—Isa 2:1-5.

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

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.

Many peoples shall come and say,  
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,  
to the house of the God of Jacob;  
that he may teach us his ways  
and that we may walk in his paths."

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,  
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

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.

O house of Jacob,  
come, let us walk  
in the light of the LORD!  
(NRSV)

Few Bible verses have enjoyed the popularity and public exposure of the “swords to plowshares” sayings in Isaiah 2 and Micah 4. The words of Isa 2:4 are engraved in large letters on the wall opposite the United Nations headquarters in New York City:

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.  
ISAIAH

In the north garden area of the United Nations grounds stands a nine-foot sculpture of a muscular blacksmith beating a sword into a plowshare. On the base appear the words “WE SHALL BEAT OUR SWORDS INTO PLOWSHARES,” with a reference to Micah 4. In Washington, D.C., at Indiana Avenue and Fourth Street, NW, stands a remarkable sculpture. Welded to a sixteen-by-nineteen-foot steel plowshare are thousands of disabled handguns confiscated by the Washington Police Department. The label for the sculpture reads, “Guns into Plowshares.” Finally, the words of Isa 2:4 in Hebrew are sung as a song of peace throughout the world: [English translation] “nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.”

The hope of which Isaiah speaks is three-dimensional. First, the hope is *universal* in scope. In this vision of the future, “all the nations” and “many peoples” come to the house of God. With such a universal perspective, it is quite appropriate that such words should find themselves on display at the United Nations headquarters.

Second, the hope is *God-centered*. “All the nations” and the “many peoples” are coming to Jerusalem *not* because they are making a pilgrimage to bring gifts<sup>2</sup> and *not*

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<sup>2</sup>This is the case in Isa 60 and Hag 2:7-9.

because they are going to take part in a festival.<sup>3</sup> These people are coming to Jerusalem to receive instruction; specifically, to be taught by the LORD Himself—“that He may teach us His ways and that we may walk in His paths.” The teaching by God is not just head knowledge. Those enrolled in this schooling expect to be taught the “ways” of the Lord, and then expect to “walk” in those ways. The nations come to Zion seeking instruction and revelation, and they—not God—destroy the weapons of war. Did you notice that in the text? It is *not* God who destroys the weapons of war. It is the people themselves who destroy the weapons of mass destruction. Listening to God, obeying His word, and trusting in Him is the basis for peace. Only God has the power to transform warmongers into peacemakers.

From time to time, I am asked whether I’m optimistic or pessimistic about the future of the world. I am neither, because optimism or pessimism is man-centered: both focus on the potential of humanity to either better or worsen itself. Therefore, I am neither optimistic nor pessimistic. Instead, I am hopeful, because hope is God-centered. And so Advent is the time of year when my hope is revived and refreshed. My hope is in God, and He will not falter and He will not fail.

In addition to being universal in scope and God-centered in its nature, the hope of which Isaiah speaks is the hope for *peace*. Having been taught by God Himself, the representatives of the nations will return to their home countries to put into practice what they have learned. As a result, whole-scale disarmament will take place, weapons of war will be changed into tools of peace, and even the war colleges and similar institutions that are devoted to instruction in methods and tactics of warfare will close their doors: “neither shall they learn war any more.”

What a beautiful vision of the future. It is easy for me to imagine folks complimenting Isaiah for his creative and challenging sermon. But the prophet is not done preaching! “O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!” Isaiah extends the invitation! But these words are not for the outsider; these words are not even for those nations that will one day stream to Jerusalem. Isaiah’s invitation is aimed at the people of God; it is directed to God’s people living in the hard realities of the present.

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<sup>3</sup>Cf. Isa 56:6-8 and Zech 14:16.

Isaiah's beautiful vision is brought down to earth. The hearers are invited to get this marvelous picture of peacemaking out of the realm of their imagination and into the real world of daily living. The prophet paints a picture of peacemaking but also exhorts the people to get busy at making peace. The people of God, both then and now, must not merely think the thoughts or talk the talk about peacemaking, we are challenged to walk the walk as well. "Blessed are the peacemakers," said Jesus, "for they will be called children of God."<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly, our text for today began with these words: "The word that Isaiah son of Amoz *saw* concerning Judah and Jerusalem." "Saw"—Isaiah looks beyond the present dismay through the eyes of God to see what will be that is not yet. This is the reason for season. This is the meaning of Advent. Because we trust in God and in His promises, by faith we see what will be that is not yet.

It is tempting for us, during this time of military conflict, global terrorism, and international mistrust, simply to write off such an announcement as Isaiah's as either unrealistic or as applying to a time beyond history and not within history. And that is why I need the Christmas season: the songs of hope and joy, the emphasis on goodwill and peace, the generosity of giving, the urgent anticipation that God will one day reign over all the earth, and that He will reign in peace.

As the church enters into the season of Advent, we should recall that what we await is not Christmas but the second advent. In one sense, the baby born in Bethlehem fulfills the promise of the Hebrew scriptures; but in another sense, the baby becomes a promise of something more, the coming of the Son of Man in glory. We no longer await the baby's birth. We await His return, His revelation as the Lord of heaven and earth, as the King-Judge, who renders judgment and sets right all that is twisted and distorted. Celebrating Christmas means reaffirming the promise and standing ready to welcome the coming God.

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<sup>4</sup>Matt 5:9.