

Isaiah 2: 1-5 “To Walk in the Light”

Welcome to the new year. Today is the first Sunday on the church calendar. When our world outside is still eating Thanksgiving left-overs and shopping for the end-of-the-year holiday sale, Christians who gather for worship on this first Sunday of Advent, quietly begin anew our journey of faith, together.

We don't simply begin again another liturgical year, but we begin anew. For none of us here are where we were in life a year ago. The circumstances of our personal lives and of the world in which we live have gone through changes, and some of what we've experienced have us wonder, what will our future hold?

That is exactly where the Scripture meets us today. To us who journey on in this world of constant changes, the prophet Isaiah gives us the unchanging Word of God that holds our future.

When I joined you back in June, I joined you in the middle of the year of journey with Jesus. Sunday after Sunday, we walked with Jesus, listening to his teaching and watching him heal, forgive, restore and save God's children. Jesus gave us the glimpses of God's kingdom; we saw God up close and personal.

On this Sunday, as we begin our journey anew, before we welcome Jesus entering into our world as our guiding light, we are invited to step back and behold the word the Isaiah saw, for it is the vision that God is calling us to claim as our future; this world of peace is what our future holds, according to the word of God, and therein lies our hope. This is the destiny of our journey of faith, this is where our lives of faith will lead to. The vision Isaiah saw is given to us today, so we can live in hope that, come what may, we know where we are going. Our future is held in this vision which has held generations of God's people from the ancient of days.

Isaiah is speaking in the language of the people of Israel, with images that were meaningful in their tradition, Jesus's tradition. And though the actual

circumstances they faced were different from ours, the word of God for the people of God remains unchanged, so let us look at the word Isaiah saw closely.

First we learn that the word Isaiah saw was concerning Judah and Jerusalem. Who is Judah? By the time of Isaiah was active as a prophet, the Kingdom of Israel had split into the Northern Kingdom with Samaria as its capital, and the Southern Kingdom of Judah, which was the House of the King David, with Jerusalem as the capital with the Temple. And Isaiah was a Temple Prophet.

During most of Isaiah's lifetime, the Kingdom of Judah lived under the threat of the Assyrian Empire. The Assyrians destroyed Samaria, the capital of the Northern Kingdom and their people were settled around the empire, and that was the end of the Northern Kingdom. (This is why the Samaritans and the Jews in Jesus's time were not the friendliest neighbors.) Then, Judah was embroiled in the political disputes among the smaller states like Syria, Palestine and Damascus, who were forming an alliance for their survival.

One of the Temple prophets' jobs was to advise the King in the national interest, in light of the will of God revealed to them, but the kings didn't always listen. Politics had always been the backdrop of the biblical world, ever since the Israelites asked for their own king; it was really the case of "be careful what you ask for."

So, the historical situation when Isaiah saw this vision was that the kingdom of Judah lived among the warring nations, which shouldn't be so difficult for us to imagine, for we, too, live with international tensions and conflicts of our own. They were real people facing real threats and problems, as we are in our own time.

And Jerusalem? Jerusalem was not just the capital of the Kingdom of Judah, but the Temple, God's House was there. It was a city chosen as the sacred place and its center, Mt. Zion, was the place where God would encounter the people in the Temple.

To the people of Israel who lived among the warring neighbors, Isaiah shows this vision of Zion, the mountain of the Lord's house, being established as the highest of the mountains, raised above the hills all around.

But what we learn is that Zion is not raised above all others to dominate, to oppress or to destroy others, as other nations were doing. In this vision, all the nations come flocking to it. Not only the Israelites, God's chosen people, but many people also say "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob."

For what purpose? "So that God may teach us the ways of God and we may walk in the paths of God" they say. For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

When the House of Judah was scrambling for survival in the midst of political scheming and threats of violence, what God promised to bring about was this: all the nations and all peoples will come streaming to Jerusalem, to the House of the Lord, to learn the ways of God and to walk in God's paths. People will come to Jerusalem to receive instruction, to be taught and transformed by the word of God.

From Jerusalem comes the Wisdom that is more powerful than all the weaponry of the surrounding nations, protecting the city and those who dwell in it; in the words of the Psalmist, "peace within her walls and security within her towers."

The vision of Isaiah continues "There, God will judge between the nations and arbitrate for many people." So, even in the world where the people are learning the ways of God, the differences, conflicts and competing claims remain. This is not some utopian dream world where everyone magically gets along. It is a world occupied by real people with real issues, and God is involved in their struggles, listening to the voices of all peoples and rendering judgment that is just.

And where all the nations acknowledge and trust in God's justice, they don't need to resort to war, or the destruction of neighbors, to resolve them.

What does such rule of justice, reign of God achieve? Isaiah unfolds the vision to show us the people beating their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; the tools they themselves had created to destroy their neighbors they are now turning into the gardening tools with which they can feed people.

It's a radical transformation of existing conditions, from nationalism and conflict to unity and peace.

Knowing not only the history of the humankind but also the violent reality of our own world, this vision of peace with justice among all nations may lie just beyond our capacity even to imagine, let alone believe. It requires that we remember and trust the one whose vision it is. It is the vision God is offering and calling us to claim as our destiny because it is God's history in the making.

Isaiah begins the description of the vision with these words: In days to come. It is not "in the last days," or comes only at the end, but days are coming. It is what God is already at work in the world to do, but not yet fully realized. Any movement in the direction of peace with justice, however small it seems, is a sign of God's work among us and through us.

What swords and spears do we have in our toolbox that we may turn into tools that gives life, rather than destroy. What room do we have in our hearts for the radical transformation from individualism to life shared in community. God is involved in our struggles as the righteous judge.

This vision given to us as we begin a new year, comes with an invitation. "O house of Jacob (all people of God, that is) Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord." Isaiah, writing this in the 8th century BCE did not know Jesus and he

wasn't writing about Jesus of Nazareth; he was simply offering the vision that God revealed to him as what God will do "in days to come," in God's future.

But it was not lost on the Gospel writers of the New Testament that Jesus, who taught and transformed people to walk in the ways of God, was the Word of God and the Light of the Lord.

In the fullness of time, God sent Jesus, so we, too, can see the Word, and walk in the Light. In the season of Advent, before we get to Mary and Joseph, and the baby in the manger, we linger with Prophet Isaiah's rich images of God's future, told in the ancient text, for it is from there Jesus comes, from the heart of God who holds our future, no matter what.