

Isaiah 2

This is what Isaiah, Amoz's son, saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

²In the days to come

the mountain of the Lord's house
will be the highest of the mountains.
It will be lifted above the hills;
peoples will stream to it.

³Many nations will go and say,

"Come, let's go up to the Lord's mountain,
to the house of Jacob's God
so that he may teach us his ways
and we may walk in God's paths."

Instruction will come from Zion;

the Lord's word from Jerusalem.

⁴God will judge between the nations,
and settle disputes of mighty nations.

Then they will beat their swords into iron plows
and their spears into pruning tools.

Nation will not take up sword against nation;
they will no longer learn how to make war.

⁵Come, house of Jacob,

let's walk by the Lord's light.

Psalms 122

I rejoiced with those who said to me,

"Let's go to the Lord's house!"

²Now our feet are standing
in your gates, Jerusalem!

³Jerusalem is built like a city
joined together in unity.

⁴That is where the tribes go up—
the Lord's tribes!

It is the law for Israel

to give thanks there to the Lord's name,

⁵ because the thrones of justice are there—
the thrones of the house of David!

⁶Pray that Jerusalem has peace:

"Let those who love you have rest.

⁷ Let there be peace on your walls;
let there be rest on your fortifications."

⁸For the sake of my family and friends,
I say, "Peace be with you, Jerusalem."

⁹For the sake of the Lord our God's house
I will pray for your good.

Romans 13

¹¹ As you do all this, you know what time it is. The hour has already come for you to wake up from your sleep. Now our salvation is nearer than when we first had faith. ¹²

The night is almost over, and the day is near. So let's get rid of the actions that belong to the darkness and put on the weapons of light. 13 Let's behave appropriately as people who live in the day, not in partying and getting drunk, not in sleeping around and obscene behavior, not in fighting and obsession. 14 Instead, dress yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ, and don't plan to indulge your selfish desires.

Matthew 24

36 "But nobody knows when that day or hour will come, not the heavenly angels and not the Son. Only the Father knows. 37 As it was in the time of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Human One.[f] 38 In those days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark. 39 They didn't know what was happening until the flood came and swept them all away. The coming of the Human One[g] will be like that. 40 At that time there will be two men in the field. One will be taken and the other left. 41 Two women will be grinding at the mill. One will be taken and the other left. 42 Therefore, stay alert! You don't know what day the Lord is coming. 43 But you understand that if the head of the house knew at what time the thief would come, he would keep alert and wouldn't allow the thief to break into his house. 44 Therefore, you also should be prepared, because the Human One[h] will come at a time you don't know.

Sermon

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

It's a new church year – and a happy new year to all – and I decided that meant 'twas time for me to start my sermons with a new reflection. I've chosen this one intentionally, because as a younger preacher, I'd heard a number of other preachers use it before...and I loathed it. Every time I heard it, I'd think to myself, "Oh what pious drivel! Of course preachers want God to like what they say, but do we have to say it out loud!? It's not like that's a Bible verse or anything." Psalm 19, verse 14: *Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.* Ha! As I read these words alongside other students during morning prayer one day in Goodson Chapel at Duke Divinity School, I realized

that the problem with beginning a sermon that way wasn't with the words themselves or the meaning that preachers put behind them, but all along, with my lack of understanding. I wasn't willing to hear the goodness in them because, for some unknown and unfounded reason, I just couldn't hear the beauty of this Psalm or its poignancy for preaching. The Psalmist, and all those preachers I judged as too pious, truly expressed their hopes for faithfulness, and as your pastor, that's something that I too want to model. That day was an advent for me, a revelation of something new, or at least, new to me.

On this journey toward newness, with new practices and new opportunities as a part of our new year celebration as we look for a new work done by our God who promises to make all things new, we're going to look together at the Advent of God's Surprising Work, not just in the birth of Jesus 2,000 years ago, but in the birth of

something new here, now, at CLC. This Advent, on Sunday evenings at 5:30, we're going to gather for dinner and a devotional conversation about three different potential futures God's opened to us. As a congregation, we've been growing in terms of Sunday morning worship attendance, overall ministry participation, and giving, but there's still a significant gap between our present income and what we need to fund the life and ministry God's given to us. The first week – tonight – we'll explore some revenue generating options. We'll look at the logistics of CLC operating a nonprofit business, like a publishing house or a food truck, that helped to serve the needs of our local community, our greater church, and helped us to generate revenue for those ministries. The second week, we'll consider what it would look like to have a pastoral intern from one of our seminaries be the primary spiritual leader of this community. The third week, we'll investigate strategic

mission partnerships, about what it would mean to share staff costs with another congregation, ministry, or business. On each of those three weeks, we'll focus on sharing information and questions, not opinions or preferences, because we can't have informed opinions without first having information. We can't know which option we prefer until we know what we can about all of the options. Then, in our last week, we'll clean up any last questions and talk about which future we'd like to pursue together as God's people at Christ Lutheran Church.

And how, I imagine y'all are wondering, does that have anything to do with an Advent sermon? That's a good and necessary question.

The season of Advent is all about God giving new birth to the seemingly impossible hopes of God's people. Isaiah today promises that God will settle the disputes between the nations, that all our weapons of war will be smelted

down and turned into tools for life. The Psalmist prays for peace over and over again in the last verses we read together. Paul in Romans and Jesus in Matthew both talk about the coming change, the expectation that God's promise to come to earth is at hand. All of this can seem quite impossible, and yet, Advent is a season of preparation, where we anticipate God showing up in new, challenging, exciting, transforming ways.

We anticipate God showing up, and so we prepare for that reality. Preparation the very nature of Advent. When we say Prepare the way of the Lord, we aren't just playing a repeat after me game with Isaiah and John the Baptist. Prepare the way of the Lord is the thesis statement of the entire season of Advent because the story ends with the most radical of changes: God becomes human. God does the impossible to make salvation possible for us. The divine enters the earthly. If that's possible, then of course the

conflicts between nations can be solved. And of course we can transform our penchant for weapons of death into a passion for tools of life. With God, all things are possible.

Following that logic, then, for our congregation, it's entirely possible to expect a transformation into a self-sustaining ministry community. The word Advent means the appearance or arrival of something of significance. In Jesus, we see the paradigm of significance, and with his significance, Jesus brings two things: life and change.

Advent as a season is about life and change, and after over two years together in ministry, we've seen the possibility of new life available through the changes God brings to us.

There's an interesting dovetail in the readings today. Jesus reminds us that no one knows the day or hour of God's return except God, and Romans reminds us to stay alert. More simply stated, no one knows what exactly the future holds, so our best bet is to prepare together for the

future. Even though we don't know the shape of that future, we're still called to prepare for it. That might seem somewhat backwards. Yet, since we know that our Advent wait concludes with the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, the most unlikely of places, we can know at least one thing for certain about our future: God is there too, no matter how unlikely that seems.

God's just got that tendency, to show up in the least likely of places and the least likely of ways. I found something like this when I entered one of my deepest episodes of depression while in college. After a number of bad decisions by myself and others led me to question my own worth, I ended up under some gigantic pine trees on my college campus, ready to hurt myself with an old pair of scissors. Fortunately I couldn't find a knife. This was all because I just couldn't see God in my future. Depression will do that to you. It's a massive attempt to cast a shadow to

God's presence and purpose in our lives. And yet, God found me. I couldn't imagine God would want to show up and make a difference. But, God showed up anyway in the graceful form of a friend who responded to a last ditch text message. I was found in tears and immediately tackled with as much compassion as someone can muster to knock sharp objects out of another's hands, and ushered back to the dorm where I was held. My friend's hands became God's hands, a type of sacramental presence that brought me into contact with God when I thought that utterly impossible. Though I'd celebrated the liturgical year every year since my birth, that day was the first Advent I'd truly known. That was the surprising significance of God that changed me and my future.

It showed me that I could expect God to show up, even if it didn't seem possible or probable. It showed me that, even when my life seemed hopeless to me, others

cared enough to intervene, that God cared enough to interfere with my course toward death and point it toward life. That, indeed, is the summary of Advent. We prepare for what we trust, that God breaks into our hell-bent spiral and transforms our trajectory toward life. That's what we prepare for in Advent, the inbreaking of God's Kingdom of life into the commonality of our death. Advent, this season of anticipation and preparation, is the difference between hope and despair.

So, that's what our discussions have to do with Advent. We're not just in a four-week season of Advent in the liturgical year. We're in the Advent of our life cycle here at CLC. We're here forsaking despair, because ain't nobody got time for that, and holding on to hope by anticipating God's presence with us, five, and fifteen, and fifty years down the road. We're preparing for the future, not because we know what it is yet, but because we know that God is

already there, working on blessing it. Let's follow the prophets, the angels, the shepherds, Joseph and Zachariah, Elizabeth and Mary, all hoping against hope that God's got something better in mind than we could ever imagine. Let's, together, prepare the way of the Lord among us here at CLC. Amen.