

Sermon for 12-1-19
Scriptures: Isaiah 2:1-5 & Matthew 24:36-44
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Understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. (Matt 24:43)

It may seem strange to be hearing from adult Jesus this morning, on the first Sunday of Advent. We're beginning a new church year; we're looking ahead to the great Feast of the Incarnation on December 25th. This morning we embark on a journey together, a journey that will lead us all the way from backwater Nazareth to a dusty manger in Bethlehem, the town of David; where God will break into this aching world in the most simple, and beautiful, and unexpected way.

But let's not jump ahead of ourselves. That's a trap we fall into far too easily during Advent... forgetting the preparation, ignoring the journey, focusing all our time and energy on the joy that's coming, without doing any of the deep soul work that it takes to arrive there in a meaningful way.

This year will be different. This year we have a guide to lead us through Advent together. His words will light each step on our path; he will unsettle us and challenge us and comfort us and inspire us in the coming days.

Isaiah, son of Amoz, born and raised in Jerusalem, probably from a well-to-do family, lived between (about) 760 and 690 BCE... Many call him the single greatest of all the Hebrew prophets; certainly the greatest poet. Ibn Ben Sira called Isaiah "the [one] whose vision could be trusted."

Now if you're picturing a dignified old man with a booming voice and a long white beard - stop. Because that's not who Isaiah is, at least not yet in the story. According to tradition, the great prophet Isaiah was only 17 or 18 years old when God called him into holy service. The Holy Land, and God's chosen people, were

divided into 2 kingdoms -- Israel to the north, and Judah to the south. The northern kingdom had fallen to the Assyrians. While they were under attack, instead of turning toward God, the people of the north had turned away from God, away from their faith, away from the traditions that had been passed down from generation to generation. Many in the southern kingdom feared they were next. The Assyrian armies seemed invincible, so it was only a matter of time before Judah (and Jerusalem) would fall, and God's people would be destroyed.

This is the context in which the teenage Isaiah receives a vision, and a message, from God. Now Isaiah wasn't a priest, or a priest in training; there's no evidence that he had any kind of religious authority... but he was married to a young woman who was also a prophet (a prophetess, we don't know her name), and they had two little boys they were raising to become dutiful, observant Jewish men.

God chose Isaiah, this young man of deep religious conviction, and sent him to deliver a message to the king of Judah, King Ahaz. The gist of the message is: trust in God, follow God's ways, put aside your own desires and put God first, in your own life and in the rule of your kingdom. And Ahaz, like so many before him (and so many after), is not ready to hear Isaiah's message.

Ahaz is not able to put his trust in God, because he only trusts in himself, in his own powers and his own strength. Ahaz doesn't think he needs God; nor does his kingdom. {And although I'm not a king or queen, I can relate... it's so easy for me to think that my hard work, and my strength and endurance, and my efforts alone will solve my problems; and who needs God when you've got everything under control, right? Whatever the problem is, I can handle it just fine on my own...}

After being dismissed, Isaiah returns for round 2 with this arrogant king, and he has developed his trademark prophetic formula: a sharp, two-fold message that flies like a golden arrow straight to the heart of Judah's precarious situation. The first element of the prophecy is hardest to hear -- Isaiah pronounces God's

judgment on the sin, the evil, the corruption that's infecting the kingdom and its people. Listen to these words from chapter 1:

"Ah, sinful nation, people laden with iniquity, offspring who do evil, children who deal corruptly, who have forsaken the Lord..." (vs. 4)

"Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the orphan, and the widow's cause does not come before them." (vs. 23)

"When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood." (vs. 15)

We can imagine King Ahaz wasn't very pleased, hearing these convicting words delivered by a teenage prophet!

But Isaiah's prophecy doesn't end with condemnation. The second part of his two-fold prophecy, the second element, is God's promise of complete and perfect restoration. Even as God sees and knows the depths of sin and selfishness and human frailty, God is working mysteries. God is preparing to do something new, something that will right all the wrongs, something that will confuse and confound the forces of evil, something that will restore and redeem all our brokenness. Something to hope for; something that will bring salvation to the earth.

Isaiah says to Ahaz, and to all Jerusalem and Judah, and to all of us today: this is how God works! This is what our God has always done, and this is what our God is always doing, even right now: making plain our sin, our selfishness, our cruelty and hardness of heart; forcing us to reckon with it, to reckon with all the ways we've fallen short... but always reminding us that evil and sin and the powers of hell will not win, they will not have the last laugh; because God's salvation is coming.

"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... For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem... 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 anymore." (2:2-4)

That's Isaiah's vision of God's promise, God's salvation for the world. Isaiah knows what's coming; he knows that whatever the powers of the world may be doing to divide and demean and destroy, there is a greater power at work, preparing to put all things right and make all things new.

Remember what Jesus said: *[U]nderstand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.*

Sin and cruelty and fear have made their home among us, just as they made their home among the people of Judah in Isaiah's day, just as they were making their home in Jerusalem at the time Jesus warned his followers to be ready. And just like then, the evil powers of this world will do everything they can to crush the hope of the faithful and keep the light of God's salvation out.

But our God is always working, always preparing to do a new thing to mend our broken hearts and restore our aching world. Our task is to watch, and to wait, and to remain faithful to God's ways; showing justice and mercy, compassion and kindness -- because, like Isaiah, we know who is the true Sovereign of the universe, and we know what our Creator asks of us.

My friends, Isaiah tells us how to be ready for what God is doing during this, and every, Advent:

So "come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!" (2:5)