

ADVENT ONE, YEAR A, NOVEMBER 27, 2022

Thanksgiving is over, Christmas is coming fast and every time you turn the news on we hear nothing but violence and disasters – shootings, earthquakes, war, terrorism, snowmageddons. It's no wonder that many of us would just like some Christmas pleasantness about a sweet baby Jesus; kind, gentle, understanding and people singing Joy to the World. We just want some calming Good News.

But – that's not what we heard in our Gospel lesson today. It's all about calamity. While we yearn for the comfort of Christmas, Advent calls us to anticipate the discomfoting realities of the world. Again, on this first day of Advent, even though we look with anticipation to the joys of Christmas, there is something surreal and unsettling about the vision portrayed in the gospel.

The American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote a poem in 1863 that sums up this gospel vision. Later on the poem was made into a Christmas carol that became quite famous; this is verse one and five:

I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old, familiar carols play,
and wild and sweet
The words repeat
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!

And in despair I bowed my head;
"There is no peace on earth," I said;
"For hate is strong,
And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"

The very joy of the bells underlines the harsh reality of a peace that isn't. Wars, tyranny, destruction. It's all too easy to be pessimistic about the present and future of our earth and our human society. If not on a grand scale, then at least in the personal hurts that everyone of us suffers. It's no coincidence that Longfellow wrote Christmas Bells after the death of his eldest son in November 1863 as a result of a battle wound sustained during the American civil war. Longfellow wrote the poem on Christmas Day that year. His son had joined the Union army without his father's blessing. This made his death even more poignant and painful for Longfellow.

Now contrast Longfellow's personal experiences to the idealistic vision of a prophet named Isaiah we heard in our first reading. He sees a day when all the nations of the world will stream to Jerusalem (the very name 'Jeru-shalom' means 'City of peace'). They will come to submit themselves to God, to learn and follow God's ways. And the consequence will be that they will 'learn war no more'. The things of hurt and harm will be done away with. Swords will be transformed into ploughs; spears into pruning hooks. All the money, all the time, all the energy, put into hurt and harm will be converted into healing, and tending, and feeding. War will be done away with, and all those associated things of violence and harm. God will rule over a world of peace, justice and love.

Isaiah sees this peace extending into the whole created order, so that later on we read: 'The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.

According to Isaiah God's will is for total peace. That's the vision of God; that's what God is working in us – God's people to achieve. Yes I know it sounds naive, but it is a vision to work for, a vision to have constantly in our minds. The terror of reality, globally or in the personal experience of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow or any of us, must not have the last word, and must not be the controlling thought. Isaiah strengthens our minds and spirits to work with a vision of hope. Ultimately the season of Advent is a season of hope.

The advent of God's time is about God's intrusion into our human story. Our Protestant tradition reminds us that we are always living in tension; not only is there darkness and chaos, but we are always holding on to the hopeful vision of God's new reality, of the peace and justice that God intends for this time and for all time

The promise we are given in these times assures us that we are called to live in hope, even in the midst of darkness. Desmond Tutu said, "Hope is being able to see that there is a light despite all the darkness." The truth is we can't wait for hope. In many respects hope is a choice in how we will live our lives because once you choose hope anything is possible. The actor Christopher Reeves, who was paralyzed from a spinal cord injury chose hope over wallowing in his plight. He started a foundation to find a cure for people living with spinal cord injuries and chose to direct. Hope is believing that we each have the power to make things better. Some of the simplest things we can do to build hope is to reach out to others, express gratitude, be kind, take care of ourselves, engage in meaningful activities. Our hope, as Christians, is the conviction that God is tenacious and persistent in overcoming the deathliness of the world.

Jesus, with great persistence and great vulnerability turned the hostility of society toward a new possibility, turned the sadness of the world toward joy and introduced a new way of life where the lost are found, and the displaced are brought home again. Our hope in Jesus ought to stimulate in us the nerve to build a better world, to overcome human strife, to mitigate our inhumanity to one another, to overturn oppressive powers that choke the life out of others. We can't wait for others to do this. It is up to each of us to recognize and live into this hope.

There is a story of a wise old Rabbi who instructed his students by asking questions. He asked, "How can a person tell when the darkness ends and the day begins?" After thinking for a moment, one student replied, "It is when there is enough light to see an animal in the distance and be able to tell if it is a sheep or a goat." Another student ventured, "It is when there is enough light to see a tree, and tell if it is a fig or an oak tree." The old Rabbi gently said, "No. It is when you can look into another human beings face and recognize them as your brother or sister. For if you cannot recognize in another's face the face of your brother or sister, the darkness has not yet begun to lift, and the light has not yet come."

The hope of Jesus Christ is a unifying hope: uniting neighbor with neighbor, uniting God and humankind, uniting prayer with action, and the movement of our hands and feet. The hope of God must be our goal and our action. Anything less leaves us to the threat of indifference or despair. Longfellow in his awful grief saw that and ended his poem:

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:

"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;

The Wrong shall fail,

The Right prevail,

With peace on earth, good-will to men."

What began in the pessimism of a war weary world made too real in his own loss ends with an alternative – the alternative Isaiah provides. Longfellow turns his sight towards the mountain of God's hope.

So what that means to us is we need to keep hammering away at the darkness in our own lives, in our homes, in our relationships, in our jobs, in our community, even in our church, until hatred is changed into love; until rejection is changed into acceptance; until quarreling is changed into listening; until apathy is changed into service; until selfishness is changed into sacrifice; until greed is changed into generosity.

It is when we respond to this call of Advent and answer it that we shine Christ's light of hope into the darkness. O come, O Come Emmanuel. Amen.