

Predestined for Peace
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
2 December 2007—First Sunday of Advent
Text: Isaiah 2:1-5

The teenager was pulled over for speeding by a policeman who had been “staked out” on a side street off Fairmount Blvd. Striding up to his car window to ask for his license and registration, the burly cop said, “I’ve been waiting for you all day.” The young driver replied, “Yeah, well I got here as fast as I could.” Welcome to the season of waiting...which most of us will race through at breakneck speed, with a full calendar and jam-packed to-do list. The waiting we will do is likely to be in traffic and in check-out lines, and will leave us exhausted and cranky.

Yet here in the northern hemisphere, when the light fades at 5 o’clock, the season of Advent begins, and the church is called to wait, anticipating God’s arrival in the world, with the light and new possibilities it brings. Perhaps the very discrepancy between hope and reality makes it hard to wait, and easy to fill our lives with distracting activities and things to amuse us, in hopes of keeping the edge off, and our fears from overtaking us. The season of waiting, however, can be so much more than a warm-up act for the Main Event. Advent is not just a time to prepare for Christmas. Properly celebrated, it can awaken us to a new awareness of God and the future God intends.

Waiting for God...hardly a new concept for the faith community. The role of the Old Testament prophets was to call attention to God’s presence in the world and to call God’s people to mindfulness of that presence and redemptive power. The reading from the Hebrew Scriptures this morning was addressed to people caught in threatening circumstances: armies backed by enemy political powers pushing at their borders, and moral decay within. Yet here the prophet paints a

vivid picture of a transformed city and world. Old, destructive patterns will cease such that *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.* Listen for God's word to the church in the reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah, in the second chapter at the first verse. [ISAIAH 2:1-5]

What amazes me about this text is that it is NOT a command. The word of the Lord that came to the prophet Isaiah was NOT to respond to the encircling enemy armies by enacting a massive disarmament plan, converting to a peacetime economy, exchanging guns for butter. Now, there is a good deal of biblical precedent for that: Jesus told his followers to "turn the other cheek" when assaulted; he proclaimed that peacemakers are blessed as children of God. But this text is not that. Instead we are given a vision of a time when this peaceful reality will be inevitable, the consequence of God's declaration and God's action. This is the world. This is the world at peace. Get it? That's what the future looks like.

Oh, really??? Because there's not much in the present that inspires confidence in that fuzzy optimism. The war in Iraq rages on, with no clear plan for end in sight. The latest round of Israeli-Palestinian talks bear the all-too-familiar marks of "been there, done that." It's not just literal warfare. The early onset of presidential primaries just weeks away makes it impossible to ignore the swords wielded by language and the clash of political perspectives. Simply to "visualize peace" strains the limits of credulity for any but the most naïve.

Still, the prophet insists on declaring the glorious establishment of God's house and all the nations streaming toward it; of peace beyond what we can readily imagine. It's God's agenda for all earth's people—dare I say it?!—for which God has predestined the whole creation. Later, the prophet makes explicit the astonishing alternative of the peaceable kingdom: *the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid....they will not hurt or destroy on all my holy*

mountain....[Isaiah 11:6-9] Again, it is presented as God's vision; God's work; God's gift of *a child...a son...[who] is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace [Isaiah 9:6]*

So we are called to wait, to consider in this present time the fresh new realities God is poised to give. The wait itself is important for the purpose of preparing the world and preparing ourselves for the gift of peace: the "shalom" of God that involves not only the cessation of conflict and the end of violence, but the experience of well-being, wholeness, blessing, justice, and love. Waiting in this way helps us see with new eyes what is not yet here.

And to find our place in its fulfillment. The text ends with not in warning, but in invitation. *Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord.* Join with God in the creative act of bringing forth new life. Assist God in divine work to redeem and reconcile creation. Notice that the prophet's words do not imply that the peace of God's realm comes in an instant, with a cosmic wave of God's magic wand. Human beings, touched by God's truth and broad, inclusive love, will demonstrate God's presence in the face of complex, ambiguous realities.

Listen. [*ring bell*] Such a tiny sound, until you understand how this bell came to be. It was forged from detritus of the civil war in Cambodia which killed over a million of its citizens. Through the efforts of Church World Service working in partnership with the people in villages all across Cambodia, metal scraps of war—spent shell casings, even unexploded artillery shells and the remains of land mines—have been gathered up and sold to village foundries. They are melted down and recast into bells like these, which are used on the harnesses of cattle, oxen, and water buffalo—still indispensable parts of rural Cambodia's agriculture. Swords into plowshares.

I'm glad to be part of a church engaged in such global peacemaking which helps make the wait for peace less burden than gestation, the "pregnant pause" before birth and new life. On a more local level, let our waiting call us to acts of compassion and service beyond the close circle of nearest and dearest. Amid verbal spear-rattling in community and church, perhaps we are being called to speak words of forgiveness and healing to someone we have hurt or misunderstood. Or to keep silence when we are tempted to criticize or blame. Perhaps learning God's way will enlarge our own vision to the point where we will let go of our personal agendas and seek God's, in the company of others.

Eugene Peterson, author of a biblical paraphrase called *The Message* expresses the surprising purpose and even joy of waiting.

All around us we observe a pregnant creation. The difficult times of pain throughout the world are birth pangs. But it's not only around us; it's within us. The Spirit of God is arousing us within. We're also feeling the birth pangs....That is why waiting does not diminish us, any more than waiting diminishes a pregnant [woman]. We are enlarged in the waiting. We, of course, don't see that it is enlarging us. But the longer we wait, the larger we become and the more joyful our expectancy.
[The Message, Romans 8]

A new day dawns, and we hear the promises renewed. And if we will stop long enough and look, we will see there, in the manger, a baby. God-with-us. Prince of Peace.

In my office is an art reproduction of Jesus' nativity. Only you wouldn't know it at first. Painted by the Flemish artist Brueghel it seems to depict an ordinary weekday in a rural village. A woman is hanging laundry to dry; the marketplace is crowded with people buying and selling. Some children are playing stickball, and a woodman delivers a load of firewood. The village church is there in the background, unlit, with the

entrance doors closed (it is not Sunday, after all). But if you look more closely at the scene, down toward the bottom of the canvas we see an obviously pregnant young woman on a donkey led by a stoop-shouldered, bearded peasant who carries a saw. It is Joseph the carpenter, with pregnant Mary, coming to town to be counted in the census.

Friends, it is hard to wait, and easy to miss the advent of a new day because God comes to us in the middle of our busy, ordinary lives. We come today to the table of the Lord aware of the jarring contrast between ideal and real:

We treasure family closeness, even as many experience heightened feelings of absence, loss, loneliness; We are invited to give, in a season in which we consume more and more and more; we thirst for the Spirit of God but settle for spirits in endless parties and frantic preparations. We have exchanged substance for fluff; truth for appearance; Jesus for Santa; a holy day for a holiday.

We need this food. Here the “real” is redeemed by the reconciling love of God; the broken becomes whole; the divided and divergent are reunited. We are sustained in our waiting, by remembering how, in the fullness of time, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth. We catch a glimpse of the future....and it is peace.

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I thought about concluding this sermon by inviting us to consider ways we can join in God’s peacemaking work and writing them in the space provided in the bulletin. At the same time, that felt a little too much like creating another “to do” list, and heaven knows we don’t need one more of those. So let’s try this instead: in the silence that follows, take your bulletin and draw a picture of two objects in the space entitled “Advent Affirmations.” Then sketch how the two might connect or become joined; for example, intertwining roots of trees; interlaced fingers of outstretched hands; two streams converging into a mighty river. As you depart this morning, please place your bulletin in the specially-marked baskets at the exits and I will use them in the sermon next week entitled

“Road Construction Ahead.” A simple drawing....a witness to the peace for which God has predestined the whole world.

[a time of silence]

Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. Even youths will faint and be weary, and the young will fall exhausted; but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. Teach us Lord, to wait for you. AMEN

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