

“Coming, Ready or Not!”

A meditation for the First Sunday in Advent based on Isaiah 2:1-5; Matthew 24:36-44

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In selecting the title for today’s meditation, I admit that I had to ask my trusted advisor-in-chief, Taylor, whether the term “Coming, ready or not!” would be understood in North American culture. Sometimes I assume people know what I am talking about, but every now and then I use a term or expression that belies my out-of-country origins, and people return my statement with a blank stare! However, Taylor assured me that everyone would know the term, whether or not those exact words were used.

One of my earliest memories is of playing hide-and-seek (or do you call it hide-and-go-seek here?!) as a little boy growing up in England. Recently I rediscovered a photo I had forgotten I had of me peering out of a dark closet (go figure!), head just visible with an eager expression on my face, “*Can’t you find me yet?*” In fact, my parents told me that I used to hide and beg people to try to find me, but I would quickly become impatient and urgently warn them, “Don’t look for me in the closet!” or “Don’t look for me under the bed!” — wherever I might be hiding at that moment. Never did it dawn on my naïve little mind that I was thereby giving away my secret hiding place...

“Coming, ready or not” is a term that, in general, can be an intimidating or overwhelming concept. In checking out the term online, I came across the following fascinating title of a recently published book entitled, “Ready or Not ... Here We Come: The Real Experts Guide to the First Year with Twins”. Now *there’s* a real sense of inevitability, almost panic associated with this phrase!

The Otherworldliness of Matthew 24:

Our last scriptural reading from Matthew 24 has much of that inevitability, almost an inherent fatalism involved with it. The coming of the day of the Lord is unpleasantly described as the coming of a thief in the night. Ready or not, it seems, this event is bound to creep up on us. The unexpected coming of the Day of the Lord is an event that has been all too often hijacked by religious extremists who would have us believe that they are the only ones who will escape the trials and tribulations of the latter days. The enormous financial success of the Left Behind series is only one indication of this unfortunate apocalyptic interpretation of our text for today.

But Advent, this church season we begin today after a lengthy period of “ordinary time” in the church calendar year, has the seeds of joy, hope, and encouragement for all who wish to find them. The word Advent itself comes from the Latin *adventus*, which simply means “coming”. Christians celebrate the four weeks before Christmas as a time to reflect on and anticipate the

“coming” of Christ at Christmas as well as the “coming” of Christ at the end of time. It is a time to remind ourselves of God’s great love for us in sending an Emissary to reveal God’s true compassion for the created world and God’s great love in enabling us to share in the glory of the coming Kingdom of God.

Advent, however, is not merely a period of looking *back* with nostalgia at the babe in Bethlehem, nor is it merely a time of passive *anticipation* of some future event, but rather one of *active decision-making in the current world*. As Christians we each have a calling to make this world a better place than we found it. And though we would like to think that we today discovered this idea for the first time, we find that as early as the 11th century C.E., St. Bernard identified what he called the “third coming” of Christ — the coming of Christ in our own souls every day. The other advents or comings of Christ are important; but it is what we do on a day-to-day basis that ultimately counts. Or as Christian commentator David Bartlett puts it, “One day Jesus may appear in the clouds, suddenly, like a thief in the night. But before that — as Matthew reminds us — Jesus will appear just around the corner, suddenly, like a hungry person, or a neighbor ill-clothed, or someone sick or imprisoned” (*Feasting on the Word*).

In wanting to dismiss the somber message of Christ’s Advent in Matthew 24 in favor of the coming of the sweet Babe of Bethlehem, we ignore the promises of a God who comes into the world, into our lives today and tomorrow and the day after, healing our brokenness, making us whole. We may remind ourselves that “salvation” and “salve” both come from the same root word, and both have to do with healing, as does the long arc of God’s dealing in history, in recreating and healing (or salving) the wounds in each of our lives.

New Hope from the Old Testament:

It is ironically in today’s Old Testament text that we find the greatest encouragement. As Isaiah 2 describes it, “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. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!”

It is important to note that Isaiah 2:2-4 realistically expects conflicts, differences, and competing claims to continue. There will still be a need for arbitration and judgments (verse 4). The difference in the new age is that these conflicts will be resolved peacefully.

It was in 1959 that the Soviet Union(!) presented the United Nations with a bronze statue entitled “Let us beat swords into plowshares”, a direct quote from today’s text in Isaiah 2:4 representing the almost universal wish of humankind to end warfare of all types. Commentator Walter Brueggemann likened today’s Isaiah passage to the “I have a dream” speech of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Our world today, unfortunately, bears little resemblance to the prophet’s vision of peace, justice, and healing. This Advent — like every Advent — we read this text in the context of war: conflicts throughout the globe, from Iraq to Korea to Darfur. We read the text in the context of strife in the home and the workplace, in families and schools across the nation and world.

But we may still be permitted to hold this beautiful and grace-filled image close to our hearts and minds during these challenging days and times. As Dr. King put it, “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” And “passive activist” that he was, he would not want any one of us to sit around waiting for that great day of peace and justice, but rather to actively work towards the fulfillment of God’s plan.

The Meaning of Advent Today:

Emmanuel — “God with us.” God is with us if we are with them. The suffering ones in God’s kingdom. As the monk Sebastian Moore stated, “Christ is present to us insofar as we are present to one another.” It is a call to share God’s love with each other — as Matthew today encouraged us to wait, watch, and hope that Christ will come in and through us. Or, as U2 band singer Bono said, “God is in the slums, in the cardboard boxes where the poor play house. God is in the silence of a mother who has infected her child with a virus that will end both their lives. God is in the cries heard under the rubble of war. God is in the debris of wasted opportunity and lives.”

How can we as people of faith transcend our differences and speak with one voice about the call to justice and peace given by a God who values each one of us? What can we share in common – our love for our children, for the earth, for the future – that brings us together in recognition that we are all children of the same God? How might we deepen our respect for one another? How might we hear one another, and in the hearing, listen for the voice of the Still-speaking God?

Together with the sages of old, we will herald the coming of the long awaited Christ Child, the coming of the infant to Bethlehem.

We will prepare for the Advent, the coming of the Christ Child. On this first Sunday of Advent, this first of four Sundays, we will prepare with repentance, with hope, and with faith. For the light of God will come into this world, as God has promised.

The Christ Child will come into the Bethlehem stable. The Christ Child will come into the world, into every life that waits, and into every hopeful heart. The Messiah comes to bring the gift of Christmas to every waiting believer. Let us today prepare to receive the Christ King — Emmanuel, God with us.