

Christina Litwiller
Salina Mennonite Church
December 1, 2019

Texts: Isaiah 2:1-5; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44

Frustration and Hope

It's coincidental that the worship resources we're using during the season of Advent proposed creating a scene illustrating frustration as the visual for today.¹ The resource writers suggested using an object symbolizing a barrier or roadblock. The Advent candles could be present on the table as a sign of hope amid the frustration.

The scene of cars and traffic cones depicted on the worship table is all too familiar for anyone driving around Salina during the past year. Often, I would attempt to drive to a familiar destination and encounter road closes and detour signs. So I would try an alternate route and sometimes discover it too was blocked. I'd be clever the next time and plan out my trip before leaving the driveway but then discover detour signs on the new route while the original one was now open.

I could deal with these obstacles more easily at some times than at others. If I encountered them when I was in a hurry or had other worries on my mind, I would rail against the detours and all the other frustrations in my life. On occasion I might have even pounded the steering wheel and spoken unflattering words about the people who placed those barriers in my way. Other times I was able to think about how much I would appreciate the end result. I'd decide I could wait in hope for the day when all the road work would be completed.

This is how we begin the season of Advent each year, crying out to God in our frustration. Asking God to break into our lives with a new light and a new hope. Asking the question, God what are you waiting for?

The first Sunday of Advent is the beginning of the Christian year. It's a season of preparation and anticipation. During Advent, we take time each week to step away from the activities, demands, and voices that bombard us during the days leading up to Christmas. We attempt to recreate the anticipation the people of God experienced when they heard the prophets speak of the Messiah who was to come. We think about what this season means for us now. We know that the Messiah has come and that the kingdom of God has already begun. But we also know that the kingdom is not fully here – not nearly.

And so during Advent we ponder the hold evil has upon our lives and our world. We reflect on what is required for relief and recovery from this mess. We prepare ourselves once again for the journey ahead, to be ready for Christ's incarnation, for God becoming flesh and living among us. We open our hearts once again to a new experience of transformation.

Advent begins with a focus on the last days, on Jesus' second coming. This is a bit of a strange way to begin a season leading up to the celebration of Jesus' birth, his first coming. However, it's a good reminder of the way the past, the present, and the future always come together in our Christian walk. The scriptures we read today remind us of our hope in Christ, the coming of God's reign in Christ, and the challenge for us to live from this hope. We remember how God worked in the past, recognize the ways in which God is working now, and anticipate how God will work in the future.

¹ Advent Resources are found in *Leader*, Fall 2019, Vol. 17, No. 1, published by MennoMedia, pp. 35-48.

In a way for us, Advent started five weeks ago when we began a worship series on some of the Old Testament prophets. We're used to hearing speeches delivered on behalf of God – words of disappointment, predictions of devastation, instructions for reform, and messages of hope

The prophet we hear from during Advent is Isaiah. Isaiah 1 contains everything we expect to hear from a prophet – the disappointment, devastation, call for reform, and hope. Beginning in verse 6, Isaiah 2 announces a cataclysm so complete and so terrifying that people will hide in caves and under rocks.

In between these grim visions is the text for today, Isaiah 2:1-5, with its vision of peace. Isaiah describes a future reality that is hugely different than the present, both his and ours.² The earth will be altered physically, the nations will be converted, and weapons of war will be changed into farm equipment. None of this will come about solely through natural developments or human means. This conversion happens through the work of God. It comes by way of God's word.

The purpose of the people going to the mountain of the Lord is so that God may instruct them. They receive this instruction so that they may walk in God's paths—so they may conduct themselves according to God's instruction. God will resolve disputes among the nations. God will decide and arbitrate equitably. Then no one will need armaments. No one need to learn how to make war.

How should the house of Jacob prepare for this? The text ends by inviting the people – by imploring them – to walk in the *light* of the Lord. It doesn't deny the darkness that surrounds and threatens them. It calls them to walk in the light—God's light—that penetrates the darkness. Walking in God's light means seeking, hearing, and following the word of God; submitting to God's peaceable, liberating judgment; and turning weapons of aggression and self-defense into instruments of cooperation and shared life.

No darkness can ever overcome this light. This is God's work and God's promise. This is a source of hope.

The Matthew text is part of a long conversation Jesus had with his disciples when they asked him about the end of the age.³ Jesus replies with an overview of the tumultuous events ahead that will characterize the period between his departure from the earth and his coming again.

Matthew 24:36-44 is part of a section in which Jesus talks about the need for believers to live in watchfulness or readiness as they await the end. We tend to focus on the action in these verses. The flood comes and sweeps Noah's neighbors away. One of the two farmers is taken. One of the two women is taken. The house is robbed.

But the emphasis of the passage really is on the question of being aware of the priority of the Kingdom of God amidst all the normal and mundane activities of life. Noah and his neighbors, the two farmers, and the two millers were all going about the activities of daily life. The difference between them is in their awareness of the big picture. They are aware of the Kingdom of God as they are going about these activities.

The passage is about orientation. As we attend to the details of daily living, we must also be alert to what God is doing in our world. We live in hope, a hope in the God who is,

² What follows is adapted from Ben Ollenburger, *First Sunday of Advent, Commentaries on Advent Lectionary Scripture for Year A*, accessed at www.ambs.edu in November 2010.

³ What follows is adapted from Mary Schertz, *First Sunday of Advent, Commentaries on Advent Lectionary Scripture for Year A*, accessed at www.ambs.edu in November 2010.

ultimately, in charge of history. Meanwhile we tend fields and grind wheat—but with a heart oriented to God and a mind alert to Christ who lives among us.

This is also the message found in Paul's letter to the Christians living in Rome, people who had never seen Jesus in the flesh.⁴ Here are Paul's words as found in Romans 13.⁵

Don't be in debt to anyone, except for the obligation to love each other. Whoever loves another person has fulfilled the Law. The commandments, Don't commit adultery, don't murder, don't steal, don't desire what others have, and any other commandments, are all summed up in one word: You must love your neighbor as yourself. Love doesn't do anything wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is what fulfills the Law. The day is near

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. 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. 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. Instead, dress yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ, and don't plan to indulge your selfish desires.

Here Paul calls his readers to readiness and vigilance. However, he doesn't call them to wait passively. Instead, he challenges them to engage actively. He tells the believers to get rid of allegiances and activities which are alien to what God values. He urges them to avoid wickedness and indulgent excesses, to resist self-gratification and behavior motivated by priorities of the flesh. Paul invites the believers in Rome to equip themselves with the tools needed to participate in God's liberating agenda in the world. He encourages them to live lives of morality, peace and modesty.

On this first Sunday of Advent, it's appropriate to take stock of our lives, both as individuals and as a congregation.

We ponder the hold evil has upon our lives and our world. What allegiances and activities are alien to what God values? How are we participating in injustice, violence, and oppression?

We reflect on what is required for relief and recovery from this mess. How might we be standing in God's way? What do we need to let go of so God can work through us?

We prepare ourselves once again for the journey ahead. Are we ready for God to dwell among us? How do we cooperate and act as the body of Christ in this time and place?

We open our hearts once again to a new experience of transformation. Can we turn weapons of aggression and self-defense – not just physical weapons, but also words and attitudes – into instruments of cooperation and shared life? Will we walk in God's light – seeking, hearing, and following the word of God?

As we encounter obstacles and cry out to in frustration, we ask God to break into our lives with new light. May the God of hope visit us this Advent season and give us what we need for these days we are in. Amen.

⁴ What follows is adapted from Jacob Elias, *First Sunday of Advent, Commentaries on Advent Lectionary Scripture for Year A*, accessed at www.ambs.edu in November 2010.

⁵ Romans 13:8-14, *Common English Bible*