

First Sunday of Advent
December 2, 2007

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Scriptures: Isaiah 2:1-5, Psalm 25:1-9, Romans 13:11-14, Matthew 24:36-44

The texts that we have today for the first Sunday in Advent are some pretty powerful, and well-known texts. But when I first read them they seemed to me to have really disparate themes. I mean, take a look at these. The Gospel text, for starters is Jesus talking about his Second Coming. This text has imagery that really captures the imagination. I remember a song from my junior high days that was about two walking along, and one would be taken and the other left alone. It was scary and kind of sad. There are bumper stickers that say something to the effect of, "In case of Rapture, that vehicle will be driver-less."

The very idea of the Rapture comes from a very human tendency to try to fill in details when we don't already have them. The text itself isn't crystal clear so over the years a narrative has been woven together from this passage, bits of Daniel and Revelation and whatnot to say that some day in the future, Jesus will come and scoop up all the good believers and take them to some sort of heavenly grandstand where they will be able to watch the last big battle between good and evil. The details get sketchy pretty quickly but one thing is consistent: all this will take place in the future. Someday Jesus will come back. Until then, keep awake, be ready.

What keeping awake and being ready is isn't altogether clear either, so some people fill in those blanks too. They use passages such as the one from Romans that has to do with avoiding drunkenness and debauchery. All in all, the focus is still on some day, down the road, and going up to heaven, the next world. There is not too much focus on the here and now.

Contrast that to Isaiah and the Psalm. Both of those are very much this-world-focused. They also include some pretty powerful imagery. For imagery it's hard to beat "Beat your swords into plowshares" It's a standard for peace movement themes. (145K Google entries) There is an old folksong that I remember, also from junior high days, "I'm gonna lay down my sword and shield, down by the river side, down by the riverside...ain't gonna study war no more."

It's pretty clear that the prophet's message of God's promise of peace is meant for this world, now. Which makes me think it is either ironic or profoundly saddening that 2500 years later we still do well to pray fervently for the peace of Jerusalem. Through Isaiah God tells us that peace has to do with learning God's ways instead of learning war. Peace has to do with settling our differences without those swords; it has to do with letting God be the judge of our actions.

Compared to the Matthew text and the Romans text, the passages from Psalms and Isaiah appear to be more about this world, right here, right now. So, why are both of these themes part of Advent 1? What do they have to do with each other? I don't think there is

a simple tie-it-up-nicely-with-a-bow answer to that. But I do think I can offer a couple of observations.

Notice one thing about the text from Matthew 24 v. 44, “the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.” Actually, in the Greek, it is a simple present tense verb: “the Son of Man *comes* at an unexpected hour” It’s not “will come” or “is going to come.” The Son of Man comes.

Put that on top of the fact that Chapter 24 of Matthew’s Gospel is part of a larger collection of teachings and warnings, the last such grouping before Matthew’s account of the Passion. The punch line of the group of teachings and warnings is in Matthew 25, the last Judgment in which the King separates the sheep from the goats. And the people ask, “when did we see you hungry, or thirsty, or naked, or sick or in prison?” The whole point of Matthew 25 is that Jesus comes every day, and is present to us in the least of these. That’s not going to be someday, but it’s today, it’s every day. The question is, are we awake, are we paying attention, are we looking for God’s presence in the people who share this world with us? Or are we on the auto-pilot of all of our old biases, old ways of being in the world and relating to those around us?

The second thing I have to offer is a question actually, about this peace and swords into plowshares deal. Which comes first? Do we have to arrive at peace so we can beat our swords into plowshares? Or, do we have to beat our swords into plowshares so we can arrive at peace? I ask this because I think it is actually pretty intertwined. Peace and war are decisions we are making. That is both so simple, and so complicated. But I can give you a good “for example.”

There is a story that is told about a day shared by the German and English soldiers during WWI. The details vary, but the basic gist of the story is the same. Since it was WWI, it was still back in the days of trench warfare, where soldiers would dig trenches and shoot at each other across the space in between their respective trenches. One year, and it might have even been the first year, on Christmas Eve, back in the days before night vision goggles, after it had gotten dark, the soldiers were no longer firing at each other and they settled in for the night. The story has it that on that Christmas Eve soldiers on one side or the other started singing, “Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright...” And somewhere in there, from across the barren field that separated them, was heard, “Stille Nacht! Heil’ge Nacht!

Alles schläft; einsam wacht...” Until through the dark night their voices joined, “..in heavenly peace, ...in himmlischer Ruh!”

The next day, Christmas Day, was a day of cease fire. Someone, probably a Brit, had a soccer ball. As two teams, the Brits and the Germans came out onto the field they had previously been shooting at each other across. And they played soccer, all day long. Night fell, and they went back to their trenches. The next day, they resumed shooting at each other. And war continued to drag on for many months. In my opinion, everybody there was asleep, they were not paying attention. They were in the auto-pilot daze of doing the things that they had always done.

And I think the folks who write these stories down always leave out some of the best details. I want to know, for example, did they use their rifles for goal posts? And the next day, did anyone say to himself, “This is crazy, I don’t think I’m going to do this

anymore.”? What would have happened if just one person would have called out, over to the other side and said, “How about another game of soccer?” Or maybe two people, if two people would have taken the ball, and gone together over to the other side and asked, “Want to make it best two out of three?” Or three people, if three people had gone maybe they would have had a movement, the “Let’s just play soccer, Anti-massacree” movement.

I think we have to be awake. We have to be ready for moments like that. They don’t happen every day. And precious few are as dramatic. But such moments do come, and they invariably come in the form of encounters with our fellow human-beings.

I remember, for example, 2001. We lived in The Colony at the time. And my regular gas station was run by someone of Mid-eastern descent. I have no idea if they were Iraqi, or Pakistani, or what. They could have been Muslim, or Hindu, or Christian. I never knew. But on September 18th or 19th I had to stop for gas. That station was usually totally busy. But there wasn’t one other car when I arrived, and none came while I was there. I remember going in to pay, and seeing the look of gratefulness on the owner’s face. It really is actions as simple as that that make a difference. We just need to be paying attention, be ready to do what can be done. We need to be awake to new possibilities, something we’ve never tried before.

Last night, at the Model T Club’s Christmas Party, the entertainment was the Dallas Banjo Band. They played some standards, like “Daisy, Daisy ...” and “Take me out to the ballgame...” and some modern pieces, some Christmas carols, and somewhere in there they played a piece that I hadn’t really thought of as a Christmas song – although surely it is. Or maybe it is a song for Advent One this time when we are waiting, filled with hope, for the coming Prince of Peace. This time when we are waiting, called to be ready. Maybe this is also the time to sing,

Let there be peace on earth,
and let it begin with me.
Let there be peace on Earth,
the peace that was meant to be.

With God as our Father,
brothers all are we,
Let me walk with my brother,
in perfect harmony.

Let peace begin with me,
let this be the moment now.
With every step I take,
let this be my solemn vow,

To take each moment and live each moment
in peace, eternally.
Let there be Peace on Earth,
and let it begin with me.

Amen