

“Addressing a Real and Profound Human Yearning”

Isaiah 2:1–5

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I have told some of you about a conversation I had during this season when I was in seminary. I was working at the athletic store in Louisville, Kentucky I co-owned when a woman who bought something sternly corrected me for writing what she thought was X-mas gift on her receipt. “Young man,” she said, “Don’t take Christ out of Christmas!”

I explained to her that I hadn’t, it wasn’t an X, I was a seminary student and a youth minister. What I had written was the Greek chi, which looks like an X. It is the first letter of Christ in Greek. If she had said, “Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t know,” I might have forgiven her piosity, but she did not. She seemed more irritated. She needed to correct someone for their impiety, and I had ruined the moment for her.

But the woman was reflecting a common spirit in the church. We become indignant about how Christmas has been commercialized. We have forgotten the reason for the season, we say, and there is truth in this perspective. Yet the spirit of againstness isn’t much of an improvement.

In *Feasting on the Word*, Baptist minister Stacey Simpson Duke suggested a different approach (Year A, Volume 1, p. 2). While all the cultural pageantry with Santa and Frosty, and the sales promotions ad nauseam point to a giddy, overhyped pseudo-Christmas driven by commercial interests, what lies underneath people’s engagement of this is a deep and genuine desire for something different, something better, something big. The reason the cultural messages are so powerful, Stacey argued, is that our human yearning is so real and so profound.

So, perhaps rather than rejecting everything about our culture, we could honor the deeper need being expressed and then name how our faith speaks to this need. Advent is a great time to do this, the season in which we look forward to the new thing God will do through the birth of a child. Advent expresses the hope that God is always able to transform the circumstances of our lives and world, though as our texts today

illustrate, this can happen in different ways — prophetic as in the vision of Isaiah or apocalyptic as in the words of Jesus — but in each way there is an assurance of God’s ultimate sovereignty, God’s ability to transform the world. And deep down, this is what people really seek, not just the stuff and the festivities, but a changed life and world.

In the vision of Isaiah, which is all we have time to consider today, the transformation begins with the mountain of the Lord’s house being established as the highest of the mountains, the place of God being elevated about all else. A little context is needed. Scholars think this oracle comes during the Syro-Ephraimitic war when the northern kingdom of Israel and the Aramaic kingdom of Damascus tried to force Judah into a foolish alliance in opposition to the Assyrians. The latter were bad dudes. They weren’t going to be defeated.

When these foes laid siege to Jerusalem, King Ahaz asked Isaiah for advice and assurance. Rather than promoting any human alliance, the prophet held up this picture of God on the highest mountain. That’s where a better world begins, he said – not with anything we devise, but with God, the God who stands over and above all things and all people, all empires and kingdoms.

It may sound simplistic or perhaps trite, but that doesn’t make it any less true. Like the faithful in ancient times, we often try to solve our own problems, and there is nothing wrong with human initiative in regard to personal challenges, national interests, or global concerns. Our best is needed, but it is not enough, nor should it be where we begin. We begin with the One who made us. Doing so enables us to have a better sense of how we might best proceed and it empowers us to do so.

But even if we don’t get everything we want — a better job, a healed relationship, a different political landscape, a world at peace — if we draw closer to our Maker, we have all we need. When it comes to cultural Christmas, it really is the stuff we want, whatever we wish for in our hearts. It’s not really the big guy in the red suit, no matter what our age, though it’s great to see him, but what we want is the toys! In our search for Advent hope, it is God we seek. There are specific outcomes we want, but most of all we need God.

In Isaiah's vision of a better world, it all begins the preeminence of God. The prophet then moves on to say that all nations shall stream to God's mountain. Many people shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that God may teach us and we may walk in God's ways."

All nations... many people... in God's vision of a better world everyone learns from God, and everyone comes together — people of different nations, with different languages, representing different ethnicities. There is more to the vision, we'll get to the part about beating swords into plowshares and spears into pruning-hooks, but the only way this happens is if the great diversity of the human family claims common ground before our Maker.

To state the obvious, this vision stands in stark contrast to the thinking of many in our culture, even those who claim to be Christian. Extreme nationalism has been on the rise, as has the concept of racial purity, and those from other nations and ethnicities are dehumanized. It flies in the face of what Isaiah says about all nations streaming to God's holy mountain and what Jesus says about making disciples of all nations.

But it is not an entirely new problem. Early in my time here, I helped teach an ENCORE class on the history of race in the southern church with Dr. Harshaw at FBC on Wilmington Street. I will never forget a question a member of that church asked. "Why is it that Christians have so much trouble embracing sisters and brothers of other races while Muslims seem to be able to transcend race, especially in the Hajj. We both said something in response. We are preachers, after all, we can always talk, but we didn't have a satisfactory answer.

The vision is clear, our calling is obvious, and there are examples of the human community, Christians included, living toward it. I think of an interfaith coffee-producing collective in Uganda whose leader I met while working with a synagogue in Winston-Salem. It began with a Jewish community that was started, strangely enough, by Christian missionaries. The missionaries had been there a while, teaching people about Jesus, and people were responding, but they were taking scripture very seriously, following the Torah in daily life. "You don't have to do that," the missionaries said, "You might as well be Jewish if you do!"

Over time, they decided, “Maybe we are.” They eventually found an organization in Israel which sent them a rabbi, and they formed a synagogue. But over more time, they realized their need to work with all people in their community. They were struggling economically and in other ways, but so were Christians and Muslims in the area. So, they proposed that all three groups work together.

They formed an interfaith cooperative to grow organic, fair-trade coffee, and in the end not only revived their struggling community; they gave witness to what is possible among diverse people. They launched a preemptive strike against fanaticism in the region. Mirembe Kawomera, the coffee is called, Delicious Peace, and it is delicious in every way.

The mountain of the Lord’s house is the highest of all mountains, and all nations shall stream to it. If we desire something better, it begins with God and involves all people across all differences coming together as one community, learning God’s ways together. Then, Isaiah says God will judge between the nations and arbitrate for many peoples; 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. God is involved, it doesn’t happen because of human efforts alone. And God not only speaks, God listens, arbitration requires listening. But in the end, weapons of destruction are transformed into instruments of production. All that tears down gives way to what builds.

Paul Duke references a Jesuit chapel at St. Louis University that is lit by fixtures made of converted twentieth-cannon shells. The founding pastor of the church I served in Winston Salem, Jack Noffsinger, a chaplain at Iwo Jima, had a rocket casing that had been transformed into a decorative item. Some years ago, Nancye Gaj gave me a cross that was made from a spent bullet shell left from the civil war in Liberia. They are all symbols of what Isaiah is talking about in this vision.

But he is not just talking about symbols; he is talking about substantive transformation. He is talking about taking a military budget and using it to grow food and provide healthcare. I am not suggesting we shut down the Pentagon immediately. Isaiah presumes a level of involvement by God that we have not yet embraced. But in God’s

vision, the goal is not one military power whipping up on everyone else. The goal is an environment in which all people lay down their weapons.

Will this ever be possible? In God's grace, perhaps, and it is worth noting that the vision closes with these words - neither shall they learn war any more. The assumption is that the ways of war have to be learned. They are not intrinsic to human nature. God just has to help us stop teaching our children how to destroy each other.

The film "King of Hearts" tells the story of a soldier who is sent into a small French town near the end of World War I to diffuse a bomb the Germans have left. The town has supposedly been evacuated, but the residents at the local lunatic asylum, as it is called then, have been left. The soldier, Charles Plumpick, tries to persuade them to leave, but they are enjoying a free run of the town. He tells them they are at risk, but they still refuse to go. "Are you crazy?" he asks at one point, but they point to the sound of artillery in the distance, the world to which Plumpick would deliver them, and say, "You think *we* are crazy?"

Sometimes insanity is in the eye of the beholder. God holds before us a vision of a better world, but we dismiss it as pure fantasy. All people coming together and listening to God, living in peace? How can we embrace such a vision? Well, what options do we have?

I heard an interview this week with U2 discussing the band's protest songs. At one point, the tone of The Edge's guitar is referenced, to which he says tone is important but not just in the music, in the message as well. We can't spend all our time lamenting the darkness, he says, we have to look to the light, even if we can't see how it will prevail. He references Woody Guthrie's song "This Land Is Your Land" which says, "it was made for you and me." It wasn't really, was it, he says, but we have to hope for something better.

That's what Advent is about, Isaiah's vision of a better world, the promise of a child to be born, the hope for salvation. The hymns of this season like "Come, Thou Long-expected Jesus" are this kind of protest song. They don't just lament the darkness; they point to the light. We may be tempted to settle for something less, but this is our hope. May God help us to hold on to it.