

**OT: Isaiah 2:1-5**

<sup>1</sup>The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem:

<sup>2</sup> In days to come

the mountain of the Lord's house  
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,  
and shall be raised above the hills;  
all the nations shall stream to it.

<sup>3</sup> Many peoples shall come and say,  
*"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,  
to the house of the God of Jacob;  
that he may teach us his ways  
and that we may walk in his paths."*

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,  
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

<sup>4</sup> He shall judge between the nations,  
and shall 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.

<sup>5</sup> O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!

**EPISTLE: Romans 13:11-14**

<sup>11</sup>Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; <sup>12</sup>the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; <sup>13</sup>let us live honorably as in the full light of day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. <sup>14</sup>Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

**GOSPEL: Matthew 24:(29-31)36-44**

<sup>29</sup> "Immediately after the suffering of those days  
the sun will be darkened,  
and the moon will not give its light;  
the stars will fall from heaven,  
and the powers of heaven will be shaken.

<sup>30</sup> "Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see *'the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven'* with power and great glory. <sup>31</sup> And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.

<sup>36</sup> "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. <sup>37</sup> For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. <sup>38</sup> For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage,

until the day Noah entered the ark, <sup>39</sup>and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. <sup>40</sup>Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. <sup>41</sup>Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. <sup>42</sup>Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. <sup>43</sup>But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. <sup>44</sup>Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

**He Shall Return: Are You Ready? – *Preparing our hearts to be present, peaceable, and prudent...***

What a set of readings to begin our season of anticipation! They are truly anticipatory, but they point to a truth that often eludes us at this time of year... As Christians, we know that our hope is in Jesus Christ, and so we celebrate the moment the Son of God was born into the world to live among us. This tends to be our focus throughout the season of Advent. But what we anticipate is much more than a chance to celebrate his birth! What we anticipate now, and each day of our lives, is that there will come a day when Christ returns in glory – in glory that is visible as God’s glory to everyone. As it says in our reading from Matthew, “all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see ‘the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven’ with power and great glory.” In other words, there will be no mistaking his Godhood, his divine authority, when Christ returns, unlike the glory of his first coming as a tiny child.

If you are aware at all of what is reported in the news each day, if you have noticed how people speak to or about one another on social media today, it should also be abundantly clear why people across the world will mourn at his coming – most of us are just not ready!

If you were to sit in prayer and quiet contemplation about your life, if you were to give an honest assessment of your every action, every choice you have made in the recent months, every relationship you have with friends and family, every thought or *word you have spoken against enemies*...Would you feel prepared for Christ’s return? **I know I would not**, if I am being honest. Even though I try to make choices and take actions that I feel align with the teachings of Christ, I know that I could definitely be more intentional in my relationships with friends and family, especially considering the physical separation we have most the time. And it is hard not to think angry thoughts against those I feel are hurting others – those I might call “enemy.”

It is not that I don’t believe in the forgiveness we receive through Christ nor that I think I must measure up and feel I fall short...I will always fall short! We all will, when comparing ourselves to Christ. What matters is the pain I cause myself and others because I am not as intentional as I should be in how I act or react. This can only get better when I am intentional in beginning my day with God, with trying to understand his will by looking at his Word, at the actions of his Son. Committing to reading short daily devotions can be a beginning, and what better time of year for new beginnings than during this time of anticipation of the birth of Christ?

I guess I have begun to wonder already if there are times that I become complacent, essentially falling asleep at the wheel or driving drowsy through life. *Have I paid sharp attention to all the opportunities to serve that God puts before me, to the chances he provides to improve my relationships with family and friends?* I know my attention is not always what it should be. This time of year, a pastor’s life is just as filled with all the commotion of family gatherings and

holiday preparation as everyone else's. But it is also one of our busiest times of the year at the Church! I definitely lean on God's love and understanding more at this time of year, knowing there are not enough hours in the day to do all I feel I should do. Still, I worry about what is important that I am missing...

Perhaps you feel this too, like you just cannot add one more thing to your load...or you will collapse under it all. If so, then you need to listen to what I am about to say. It may seem counterintuitive, but a short time devoted to God will actually help relieve some of your stress, as your focus on him helps you to offload some of what is weighing you down. Centering yourself on God opens you up, allowing you to experience hope during this crazy time of year. It may even allow you to bring hope to others because you can remain calm in the midst of everything. Such calm comes from God despite the tumult around you, and it can be not only infectious, but inspiring. People wonder what allows you to live in hope – and that provides an opportunity to *share about your faith*, your dependence on Christ and his Spirit.

I have emailed you all (at least, those of you who use email) **daily Advent devotionals** for this week. I sent it early Friday morning. I have printed out only a few copies, so that those who don't do much with technology can still have access to these readings and thus the opportunity for daily guided contemplation of God. If these devotionals are used as intended, this will not ADD to your load, but rather should make your outlook this holiday season *less anxious* and more joy-filled, as you share your burden with God.

It is time for us to awaken, instead of going through the days ahead in a daze from too many demands. **Salvation draws near.** Centered in God, you can feel it. Centered in Christ not only do you hope, but *peace* can be yours as well as *joy* in life – even at this time of year, when life gets crazy; even at this time in history, when *chaos seems to reign globally*. Peace is made possible when we live in the forgiveness offered by God through Christ. Joy and love are made possible when we forgive others, or accept their offered forgiveness, rather than holding on to the hurts of the past.

Our hope is in the Lord. We can do nothing to change the past, for we live in the present. But in the present we can make amends for deeds of the past. In the present we can repair broken relationships, heal the wounds of the heart – both ours and others'... It is by living in the light of Jesus Christ that we can prepare for the future coming of our God and King. It is in this moment that we can choose to put aside the words and actions that have previously divided us from others and seek peace together. If someone is not interested in seeking peace, then do what you can from your end of the broken relationship. You cannot be responsible for how another receives your actions or your attempts to make amends. You are not responsible for allowing their heart to change – the state of their heart is between them and God. But you are responsible, as a follower of Christ, for doing what you can to make healing of past hurts and broken relationships a possibility.

That extends even to situations where others have hurt you, where the fault is not yours. Peace will be accomplished only if we are willing to put aside the wrongs of the past and seek peace for the future. And we are taught by the Word of God, in Romans chapter 12:

“<sup>17</sup> Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.

<sup>18</sup> If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. <sup>19</sup> Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, *'Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the Lord.'* <sup>20</sup> Instead, *'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink, for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.'* <sup>21</sup> Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

This is the prudent teaching of God. If we are to be prepared for Christ's return, we must seek peace, and do whatever good is within our power to do, even to those whose hearts may never turn and seek the light of Christ. Evil will not overcome evil, but good can, *because **God can*** – actually, because God has already defeated the power of evil for us, setting us free to live within the will of our Father. Living in the present in this way, we will be prepared for Christ's return, *wherever we are, whatever we are doing*, for we will be living *in Christ* and the deeds of our past will be covered by him. We must **live as the forgiven people we are** and be ready to forgive others. Finding our daily center in God prepares us to be forgiving in the present moment. And having a forgiving heart is **healing for you**, whether or not the other person accepts your forgiveness or forgives you in return. Therefore, as the Apostle Paul said, *"as far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."*

This is living in anticipation of Christ's return. This is what it means to prepare your hearts.

So, as we prepare to celebrate the birth of God's Son, the Christ child, find some time for quiet contemplation, to leave behind (at least for a moment) the business of the holidays, that you might go about the work of peace. Put on the armor of light; put on the Lord Jesus Christ to begin your day.

Let that be the work of Advent for you this year, so that you are prepared to live in hope, seek peace, find joy, and extend love. You are enabled to do this once you *know* that you are deeply loved by the Father, as are all your friends, family, and yes, even your enemies. So, love because God loves us enough to send us the Christ child. In this way, may you all be prepared to cheer when Christ comes again, to shout loud hosannas to our King.

*To God be all glory forever. Amen.*