

HOPE – Future and Present in the Same Moment
Lessons: Isaiah 2:1-5

Why the rush to Christmas? If we wait until the last minute, what will we miss?

Well, we would already have missed Black Friday. We have to rush to buy that special deal at 5:00 a.m. – because it “below cost.” Of course, we aren’t sure who will get the present, but we have time to figure that out.

We would miss counting the shopping days. Now, how could we possibly miss those messages. They are scattered through the paper, for those who still read the paper we used to call the “news.” The “days until” are in those blinking ads in the margins of our web pages while we shop on the internet.

We would miss hearing “Happy holidays” in those commercials we see over and over and over again while we are watching something important – like football or, more important to me, basketball.

We would miss the holiday music about chestnuts and snow and sleighs and white Christmases. I’ve only seen one white Christmas in Texas – in Corpus Christi in that Texas weather storm of 2003. It snowed all night, and twelve inches stopped all the traffic but Santa Claus. I was following truck tracks in the fog on the main highway back to San Antonio. But the snow ran out about 50 miles from San Antonio.

We would miss the way we mark the days until Christmas by when we put up the lights on the house, when we put those special ornaments in the same place on the tree, how we arrange the dining room table or fix the mantle over the fireplace – maybe it will be cold enough that we can open all the windows and build a fire this year.

Here’s the truth of the matter: the Christmas rush is not really a conspiracy to get us to spend more money this year in a patriotic sacrifice to help out the nation’s economy. We have stretched Christmas ourselves, because we love it so much that one day just isn’t enough.

We build up our hopes for the perfect Christmas this year – or at least a better one. We have those rituals of putting up the tree and marking the days because we love the great memories of Christmas past. We have hopes that the future will fulfill the dreams of the past, be better than it has ever been. This year will be better... Christmas does not want to wait. The HOPE of Christmas is coming in Advent.

Still, why the rush? Christmas will come on December 25 and not a moment before. It’s just that in this time before, the present and the future get squeezed into the same moment.

Now, I want you to notice something if you haven’t already. So far, I haven’t said a single thing about a religious connection to Christmas. I suppose that in a sanctuary, we ought to think for a few moments about just how much of our treasured memories and our great expectations around Christmas don’t have anything to do with Christmas. I used to get a bit miffed with all the “Happy Holidays” greetings instead of the “Merry Christmas” cheer. But I like it now. It’s

more honest. Christmas out there is different from in here. Christmas out there is really about a *holiday*. In here, Christmas is a *holy day*.

In here, there is no reason at all to rush to Christmas. It isn't Christmas season until the 25th. There are 12 days in Christmastide, and they don't have much to do with pear trees and drummers drumming. They are the twelve days between Christmas and Epiphany on January – the day we remember the visit of the magi and their gifts. What if we all had to wait until January 6 to open those presents?

So, maybe you have a hint about why there is no Christmas tree this year on the first Sunday of Christmas. What's the rush to Christmas? And maybe you have figured out why we only read the Old Testament lesson as the lesson today. Before Christmas, the law and prophets were all they had to read. The season has changed, but it still is not Christmas season at the church. We have another whole season before we get to Christmas.

Like the wreath reminds us, the season is Advent on the calendar of holy days in the church. We are done with Ordinary Time for a while. A new year starts with Advent, and it starts with some focused preparing, some watching getting ready. The word "Advent" means "coming" – but not here yet. Out there in our Happy Holidays celebrating, we are smack-dab in the middle of the season just two days past Black Friday. But in here, we have a very different kind of "getting ready" and looking back and looking forward with great expectations.

In here where we sync our time with God's timing, we have four weeks to get ready for the moment when the future becomes the present, when the light of hope flickering in the darkness of waiting through the long night becomes the reality of a hope we can live in every moment of every season.

Put yourself back into that time when Emperor Augustus owned the whole world and needed to finance the next war. So he declared a counting to maximize the taxing. Jews, now at the mercy of Roman rulers, remembered a long history of being at the mercy and injustice of foreign rulers – the Egyptians, the Philistines, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Greeks. In every season of their long misery, God had raised up a savior – a Moses, a David, a Uzziah, a Hezekiah, a Judas Maccabeus. So in servitude to a new ruler, they prayed for a savior and hoped for rescue from the Emperor. They read the prophecies, and looked around hoping for the Messiah who was promised and who was too long in coming.

They read the prophecies of Isaiah. In that first century of Roman domination, they read Isaiah differently than we do today. We see the book separated from its time and history. We read "prophecies" and think God is telling us the future and "a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and you shall call his name Immanuel." We'll talk about that unfortunate mistranslation in weeks to come.

Today, what is important is that what Isaiah spoke to King Uzziah had come from the Lord. And the king and the people listened, and God saved them. Uzziah was a son in the line of David. He became king at 16, and his 52 years of reign were the best the country had seen since David. But in the middle of all that prosperity and plenty, all that wealth and expansion, the nation had turned from trust in God. Worse – poverty had multiplied in the middle of plenty. [Can we moderns imagine that?] Wealth focused on lavish living had not done much to encourage generosity or justice. Greed was celebrated. God was good. The nation was healthy,

and those crafty alliances with neighbor nations insured the national security. Or, so they thought.

The passage we heard with the lighting of the candle of HOPE is full of hope. “In days to come,” says Isaiah, the mountain of the Lord will become a Mecca of worship for all nations. People will gather to learn the ways of the Lord, and more importantly, they will walk in them. The swords of protection will become the plowshares of sharing. The spears of killing will become pruning hooks for healthy growth of the tree of justice. It was a future that the Lord would bring. It was a hope that all could embrace. But it was not the present!

It is Advent, and there is preparing that must be done for the coming. Isaiah says that the Lord will do this, but there is much that the people must do. Preparing for the Lord’s saving, is not going about business as usual. Preparing is not just waiting for the inevitable rescue that the Lord will bring because they are the chosen. The people of Isaiah’s time heard the vision of hope in the Lord, but it was not cut into chapters and isolated from Isaiah’s message about the present vision of unfaithful living and the need for turning to the Lord’s ways. Hear Isaiah’s word from the Lord about the present tense of the people that must be dealt with before the future of the Lord’s HOPE will come...

Isaiah 1:21-31

How the faithful city has become a whore!
She that was full of justice, righteousness lodged in her--but now murderers! Your silver
has become dross, your wine is mixed with water.
Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves.
Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts.
They do not defend the orphan, and the widow’s cause does not come before them.
Therefore says the Sovereign, the LORD of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel:
Ah, I will pour out my wrath on my enemies, and avenge myself on my foes!
I will turn my hand against you;
I will smelt away your dross as with lye and remove all your alloy.
And I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counselors as at the beginning.
Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city.
Zion shall be redeemed by justice, and those in her who repent, by righteousness.
But rebels and sinners shall be destroyed together, and those who forsake the LORD shall
be consumed.
For you shall be ashamed of the oaks in which you delighted; and you shall blush for the
gardens that you have chosen.
For you shall be like an oak whose leaf withers, and like a garden without water.
The strong shall become like tinder, and their work like a spark; they and their work shall
burn together, with no one to quench them.

Isaiah tells us that we see HOPE in the Lord only when the vision of the Lord’s future coming to save meets the present of turning from evil ways to go good by the Lord’s command.

So here we are in the first century, before a baby is born in a borrowed barn to a couple who were part of a nameless crowd gathered in a town over-populated for a census. Here we are with no one in particular saying that a young woman is pregnant with a Savior. The town is busy with buying and business as usual. The people are talking Augustus and taxes and sorry politicians.

They are rushing to see friends and looking at the calendars to see what they can cram into the visit before they go back to ordinary time. Streets are busy with traffic, restaurants are doing a booming and boisterous business, and the inns are all flashing “no vacancy” signs. No one much is paying attention to Isaiah’s prophecies – either the ones about the hope of the Lord’s coming in the future or the ones about the need for turning from their ways in the present. They turned travel and a census count into time for a holiday.

And in their rush to pack all they could into the holidays, they missed the first Christmas completely. Oh, they all had great hope that God would save them from the threats of a foreign despot. They all trusted that sooner or later God would bring another King David to restore the glory of the kingdom and regain its rightful place as the center of the known world. But that was all something only God could do, and in the meantime there was only so much they could do. Yes, the day of the Lord was coming and the vision was still wonderful, but they lost the connection between the Lord’s Day and their days. They did not realize that HOPE is always future tense in the present tense. HOPE is the way the future is here and now to point us in the right direction. HOPE comes in Advent to teach us the Lord’s ways, so that we will walk in them toward God’s vision for our future.

There was so much going on that no one really listened to those shepherds who came to town asking where a barn with a manger might be.

Why the rush to Christmas? If we wait until the last minute, what will we miss? If we get so busy with the holidays of Christmas, with our habits and routines, with our rituals and traditions, with our planning to make it perfect like we tried to make it perfect last year, guess what we will miss.

We will miss the HOPE of a Savior, when present and future meet in the moment of the Lord’s word made flesh, living and walking among us each day, teaching us how to prepare our hearts and our actions for his coming.

Wouldn’t it be better to spend the season focused on the Lord’s Advent – the Savior’s coming? God knows – and yes, we all know – that the world is in a mess and our nation looks a lot like David’s Jerusalem before the fall, and Uzziah’s kingdom at the beginning of the decline, and Jerusalem’s faded glory before the Babylonians showed up. Or maybe we are just like Bethlehem – all busy with a census and a holiday, oblivious to the great thing God was doing in the middle of their being occupied with more important things. God’s HOPE is not just out there in the future. It is right here in the present, and we already have enough light to see it.

It’s Advent. Will we look for God’s HOPE that is coming all around us? In the next four weeks, let’s take a hint from the prophet who turned out to be right about a lot of things, and listen for the word of the Lord about his coming. Let’s look for the places where Isaiah says we might find him. Let’s be more attentive to widows this season. Let’s look closely at the humble people that others ignore. Let’s listen closely to the outcast and the oppressed who cry out everywhere. If we are on the watch and standing at the ready, if we are listening for that voice that others keep drowning out, we might just come to church ready for Savior on the 24th. When we gather prepared for his coming, we will surely hear angels sing.

Prayer from the Children’s Time: “Dear God, help my heart get ready for Jesus.” Open my heart to the HOPE of his coming. Amen.