

Hope, actually

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 27 November 2016

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Advent 1A

Isaiah 2: 1-5, Matthew 24:36-44

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under "Sunday Reflections" tab

Today is the first Sunday in the season of Advent. Four more Sundays and then it will be Christmas Day. But Christmas is already happening in the world of around us. Increasingly, people have their Christmas parties in November to avoid the rush of December. The city of Sydney already has its colourful Christmas banners up... The shops are decorated with lights and tinsel and trees. I am grateful that I have not yet heard any Christmas carol muzak, but I know it cannot be far away. (I have been avoiding Westfield Mall intentionally.)

In a culture that starts decorating for Christmas sometimes as early as October, Advent is a practice that is profoundly counter-cultural.

The word "Advent" comes from the Latin word *adventus*, which means "coming" or "visit." In the season of Advent, we keep in mind two "advents": the first in stories of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth found in Matthew and Luke's gospels, and the second "advent" the coming reign of God when the conflict and division of the world will be transformed into love and justice and peace.

This 'second coming' seems as far off this year as ever... and with some of the things that are happening in global politics, it feels beyond even our dreams. For some of our community, the realities we face in our personal lives, or in the lives of our family and friends, also make it terribly hard to hold on to hope.

As we dwell in this Advent, as we enter this time, we recognise the uncertainty of the global situation caused by the recent American Presidential election. We pay attention to a world where violence continues unabated in Syria, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Somalia, Iraq and other places. This, our world, where the talk of terrorism is accompanied by demonization of an entire community of Australians as generations of Lebanese Muslims have been stigmatized as an immigration mistake.

We see the absence of God's reign in so many places, including now in the potentially explosive anger of people who are economically marginalised, and in the damage to the earth that we will leave as a tragic legacy to our children and our children's' children. Superstorms, floods and droughts, receding glaciers, vast islands of plastic floating on our oceans, animal species facing extinction... This is not the new earth for which we long, for which we hoped, for which we dreamed.

On the Sundays in Advent, we light the candles of the Advent wreath. Purple for hope. Purple for peace. Pink for joy. And purple for love. But this year at Pitt Street, we will continue to focus on hope through all four Sundays in our liturgy and preaching. For 2016 is a year when hope requires our sustained attention.

Even though the subject of Advent is future-focused: the one for whom we wait, the world reborn for which we wait; paradoxically Advent is a time to pause and to dwell in the eternal present.

Soon we will turn our attention to Mary the very human mother of Jesus. When you are eight months pregnant you are simply unable to keep rushing around at the usual pace. You inevitably slow down and you watch and wait and wonder and ponder things in your heart.

But Mary and the child who will show us the way, the hope of God with us, feature nowhere in the Bible readings for this week. Why you might wonder do the creators of the revised common lectionary, which guides our readings, insist on doom and gloom and the apocalyptic end of the world to begin the season of Advent? What's that got to do with waiting for something? Something as disturbing and amazing as God incarnate, God embodied?

The text we heard read from Matthew's gospel is a favourite for fans of "Left behind" theology which excitedly hopes for a so-called rapture in which saved people will head upward to heaven leaving behind the unsaved who will supposedly face years of horrible torment.

It is a passage that is misread and misunderstood. Because while the rhetoric is future focused, we are simply told that no one knows when the Promised One, the Human One, is coming. The point of the text is exactly the opposite of trying to calculate the end of the world. The point is dwelling with integrity in the here and now, so that we are always ready for the coming of the reign of God.

The reading from Matthew, in fact, calls us away from future anxiety. We are not expected to know everything, but we are expected to do something. And that something is to live well, to join in God's unfolding love and justice:

To hold on to hope, even when the signs and portents of our times point not to the light of lights, but to the times of troubled gloom. We are called to notice and name the sources and signs that give us hope.

The text from the Hebrew Bible connects us more directly to hope. Isaiah's vision has resonated with Jews, Christians and secular thinkers down through the ages. Swords into ploughshares, spears into pruning hooks...

Isaiah's vision was articulated more than 500 years before the birth of Jesus. His context was Jerusalem before the Exile. Not Jerusalem in its glory days, but Jerusalem destroyed and burned by conquering powers. Amid violence and destruction, Isaiah called the people to trust in the promises of the Holy One; the Holy One more powerful than any army. He called them to hold on to hope for the future – a future vastly different than the ruin that lay before them.

Isaiah's words are graceful and evocative. His vision of the weapons of war transformed into tools of agriculture has captured human imagination and encouraged peace-makers for millennia.

Isaiah's words are engraved on a wall near the United Nations headquarters in New York City, inspiring people of many nations to find a way through to human and planetary community marked by justice and peace.

Today, we hear these words from Isaiah not only in a time mired in conflict and contention, anxiety and war, but in the season of Advent.

Walter Brueggemann describes Advent as "*an abrupt disruption in our 'ordinary time'...an utterly new year, new time, new life.*"

Despite what is, despite what we fear might be, we are invited to step forward into a new time, to begin a season of hoping and waiting for a dream.

Brueggemann goes on: "*Advent invites us to awaken from our numbed endurance and our domesticated expectations, to consider our life afresh in light of new gifts that God is about to give*" (Texts for Preaching Year A).

At the beginning of a new church year, we remember Divine Presence, and set our hearts on a world renewed. But, remember that Isaiah's graceful vision is clear about our part in God's dream. There is work for us to do in reshaping the instruments of war, violence, and destruction into instruments of peace and provision for all.

Have our expectations of such wonders become "domesticated?" Are we simply enduring the conditions around us, feeling too "numb" to hope for change?

Advent is not just for our global, political economy, for an end to the violence of wars. It is also a hope for us in our interactions with the people we encounter in our everyday lives, including our closest friends and family.

It is so easy for human hearts to grow entangled with small-scale resentments or even bitter hatreds, born of frustration and disillusionment. We find it hard to move through times of discouragement, even injustice, without hardening our hearts and resisting healing and peace. Haven't we often beaten our personal and communal pruning hooks into spears to protect our own territory?

Isaiah's promise that there will be a time when God's way will shape how we live is a promise for individuals and a promise to the nations, moving toward the light of peace. Advent recalls us not just to the long view but to the practical everyday steps that must be taken by God's people making peace-making a priority in our everyday lives.

During this season of Advent, for the sake of peace, we can take real, concrete steps to heal division, alienation, and broken relationship in our family, in our community, and in our world, if we only have the courage to do so. Beginning with just one step, one relationship, perhaps one apology or offer of peace, one hand outstretched to a person of another race or religion, we need to believe that we can be part of God's dream.

Through such small acts, through such healing, we will touch hope. We will touch hope, if not necessarily comfort, in the waiting of Advent.

I want to conclude by drawing your attention to the intriguing sculpture on the table in our midst. Created by renowned Sydney artist and Pitt Street member, Michael Buzzacott, tis sculpture will accompany our Advent journey. In this work, Michael has taken rigid, cold steel, and transformed it to evoke the fluidity of the natural world, to represent the softness and delicacy of a bunch of flowers. This sculpture speaks to me of the Isaiah text, with the peaceful hope of swords into ploughshares, and of another Hebrew bible prophecy that we will hear in Advent, the promise that the desert shall bloom. Out of an unlikely, apparently lifeless source, we are assured that joy and beauty will come.

That Divine Presence is at work in the world, in and through us, and wherever people are touching hope.

We live "in the meantime." How we live is up to us. I leave with you the inspiring, hopeful words of preacher and writer, Barbara Brown Taylor:

"Every morning when you wake up, decide to live the life God has given you to live right now. Refuse to live yesterday over and over again. Resist the temptation to save your best self for tomorrow." (Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew)

Amen.