

“Get Ready? For What?” An Advent Sermon by The Rev. Keenan Kelsey
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IT IS ADVENT. It is that disruptive season that demands we defer any cultural immersion in the pre-Christmas merriment, and wait. Shepherds are still off minding sheep on the hillside, oblivious to future events. Magi remain in the East, studying their charts. Mary hasn't had Jesus yet. She and Joseph are still in Nazareth trying to figure out their relationship. And we are waiting. But it is not a passive waiting --

There is an urgency and an activity associated with Advent waiting, the kind reflected in our Gospel reading for today. As the first day of a new liturgical (or church) year, we leave the world of Luke, and join the community of the Evangelist Matthew. Writing around 70 AD, probably living near Antioch in Syria, Matthew is part of a second generation of Christians. They are Jews by birth, by culture, and by religious upbringing. But they are followers of Jesus, converts to a faith just beginning to separate itself. The emergence of new rabbinic institutions and severity of further Roman political restrictions have caused them to move away from the synagogues. The Christians are on their own, and feeling restless, uncertain, only beginning to understand the prospect of persecution.

Matthew writes to remind his community that Jesus, as the bearer of a new recovered righteousness, has become the new Torah, the alternative to rabbinic teaching. Matthew wants to protect his church from dangers that threaten from within, especially the danger of falling back to Judaism.

Hear these words of urgency and expectancy as Jesus speaks to his disciples, to Matthew's community, and to us as well, of the need to stay vigilant, the need to keep an active faith. Matthew 24:36-44: *But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Creator. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 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, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. 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. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.*

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ALL AROUND MARIN COUNTY these days are large official-looking yellow signs that say, in bold letters “Get Ready Marin.” That is the sole message: “Get Ready Marin” and then there is a web site listed.

For months I have paid little attention to the signs. I thought it might be some sort of promotion or come-on. Soon, like a teaser billboard, the signs would be replaced with an announcement, and event. But that has not happened. We are still reminded on a daily basis to Get Ready!

Why? Get ready for what? I admit to being only vaguely curious about these signs, certainly not interested enough to check out the website. I am too busy living my own life.

I am right there with Noah's contemporaries who are eating and drinking, marrying and giving children in marriage, assuming that business-as-usual will continue forever, leaving neither time nor reason to face the future. I would probably be scoffing at the preposterousness of Noah.

I am the home owner, who has never been robbed, and unaware of any impending crisis, is lulled into a false security.

I am one of Matthew's community of faith, rooted in the promises of the prophets of the Hebrew Testament, passionate believer in Jesus as Messiah who came in order to make the visions of the prophets a lived reality of the people. But—I am a little bored with the waiting. It's been a long time. I am a little jaded by earthquake warnings and red alerts and orange alerts and prophets promising peace.

Everyone wants peace. It's carved in stone right there at the front door of the United Nations building in New York: "And they shall beat their swords into plowshares." But we continue to live in a world where arrogance and greed and violence and fear rule, where might makes right and a superpower can invade a country like Iraq and tell its citizens to be like the contemporaries of Noah, go shopping and pretend nothing is happening. The Second World War, supposed to be the "war to end all wars," demonstrated that there are no winners in a war -- everyone loses (with the exception of those who manufacture armaments). Yet since then we've had a whole series of deadly conflicts, and now we are up to our eyeballs in the eastern Mediterranean. Ours is still a world of holocausts and Iraq's and Darfur's, a world of baby rapes and pandemic AIDS, a world of hunger and poverty and injustice. I am probably not the only one who despairs when singing about the "Prince of Peace" every year, when said Prince seems more and more to be a figment of pious imagination.

"Get ready! Hey, God is still in charge!" "Keep awake!" Jesus says. "Trust God, I mean REALLY trust God! God will make the world whole and well and safe."

Jesus calls me back to the vision of the prophets, particularly the vision of Isaiah that raised the spirit of the people of Judah and of Israel and yes, of believers today. Isaiah spoke to Jerusalem before the fall. The Holy City had become a marginal and vulnerable operation, flourishing or suffering at the whim of surrounding powers. The Hebrew people were turning to pagan gods, grabbing at the culture of commerce rather than the faithfulness of religion. Isaiah critiqued and condemned this arrogant enterprise of national pride, self sufficiency, and self-serving religion. But, he never dismissed it. For this was also the city which held enormous hope, the city of God's Temple.

So Isaiah said, "In the days to come." He invited the Hebrew people, just as he invites us, to look through the eyes of God, to see what will be, that is not yet. He offers us a prophetic vision, an act of imagination, that looks beyond the present dismay to an alternative economy, a world of justice, peace, and well being; a world that has been healed, blessed, and cared for, a world we can

believe in and live into. Listen to the poet Isaiah (2:1-5):
The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.
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.
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.
He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning-hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.

Can swords really become ploughshares?

Cesar Lopez is a musician in Columbia, a country torn by conflict. He studied at Colombia's best conservatory. But instead of concert hall performances he chooses to play his music on the streets of Bogota. One day, after witnessing a slaughter, he took the Winchester lever action rifle that killed four people and made it into a musical instrument. Today, he continues to take Ak-47s and convert them into guitars. The proceeds from their sale go to peace groups in that region. In Columbia peace efforts are often tied there to inequities and result in improvement in everyday needs. As one Lutheran Relief worker put it: "Peace will be brought about on the healing power of three meals a day."

Dare we dream? Is Isaiah's world possible?

In Vietnam, brass candlesticks are made from shell casings; one pair supports a family for a month.

After the bombings stopped in Cambodia, Church World Service supported cattle raising projects. During a visit there, A colleague of mine saw cattle drinking from watering troughs made from bomb or artillery shells cut in half lengthwise.

Farm machinery is actually being made from guns and tanks in Sierra Leone; one tank provides a year's work for five blacksmiths, who turn it into enough farm tools to equip a farming village of 100 families.

In Papua New Guinea the village church had a bell made out of a hollowed out 500 lb bomb from WW II. It hung by the fins on a metal frame and was tapped on by a hammer to call the villagers to worship.

And this week, there is another small step toward peace between Palestine and Israel.

You know the signs I mentioned “Get Ready Marin”? Turns out they are promoting a series of county-run disaster preparedness training. We need to know what to do, not just for earthquakes, but for fires and even floods. The county had been offering weekend workshops, but few people took the possible trauma very seriously. So now the county has whittled the training down to a choice of numerous two- hour workshops. What will it take to get our attention?

Get ready Marin. Know what to do in time of disaster. Get ready world. Know what to do when God’s new world in-breaks into our current world! We are accustomed to being called to prepare for disasters. It is a new reminder to prepare for signs of grace, evidence of hope, peeks of peace.

The truth is, our world is always in pursuit of peace. From the beginning of time, we yearn for true shalom. We just don’t know how to do it very well. The Advent reality is that each one of us lives in the shadow of the apocalypse – the dark reality of the end of our time and the end of the world’s time. But the promise of Advent – is that in the darkness, in the shadows, in the unpredictable anxiety of our unfinished lives, God is present. God is in control, and shalom will come. The promise is that wherever there is darkness and dread in our lives, wherever there is darkness and dread in the world around us, God is present to help us endure. God is in charge, and hope is alive. And as long and as interminable as the night seems, morning will come - in God’s good time and God’s good way.

Frederick Buechner reminds us to dream:

"The path of your dream winds now this way, now that -- one scene fades into another, people come and go the way they do in dreams -- and then suddenly, deep out of wherever it is that dreams come from, something rises up that shakes you to your foundations. The mystery of the dream suddenly lifts like fog, and for an instant, it is as if you glimpse a truth truer than any you knew that you knew if only about yourself."

Evangelical preacher, and activist Jim Wallis says, you cannot start a movement, you cannot start a revolution. You can only prepare for it. You can only be ready for it.

Brothers and sisters, another world is possible. Indeed, it is happening when people trust God and hope. Advent reminds us to be ready. So open your eyes and your hearts. Pay attention. Get ready!