

# “Hope Through A Vision”

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December 1, 2013 – First Sunday of Advent (RCL, Year A)

University Presbyterian Church of Tempe, Arizona

## Isaiah 2.1-5 (NRSV)

<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!

## Matthew 24.36-44 (NRSV)

<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.

Black Friday continues to be a growing phenomenon that now bleeds into Black Thursday and even pre-Black Friday events happening in October as we're encouraged by advertisers to "get ahead of the 'ahead of the holidays' crowd." There was a time when the *week* before Christmas was the big shopping season when parents scrambled around town, kid's wish lists in hand. But now, it's been turned almost into a sport of who can last the longest in line in freezing temperatures, who comes the most prepared, and, of course, who can get the best deals among the ever so limited carrots of temptation dangled in front of a salivating public on TV, weeks before the big day. Retailers continue to push the boundaries of Black Friday, opening both their physical as well as cyber doors, in many cases, on Thursday or even earlier. The reason is simple: in this one month alone retailers count on raking in about 20 percent of their annual sales.<sup>1</sup> A day set aside for the express purpose of giving thanks, established by President Lincoln in honor of those who came to this land so long ago to escape religious persecution, has morphed into the starting gun blast for the holiday shopping sprint. Where once the holidays were a time for gathering with family and cherishing the beauty around us, is now a mad rush for retailers to boost their profits and consumers to, well, consume at the cheapest price. Even Macy's, one of the last hold-outs who once refused to put out

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth A. Harris, "Shop First, and Eat Later", *New York Times*, Nov. 28, 2013.

their famous Christmas displays in their Manhattan headquarters had transformed their store windows in early November in order to start building the buzz and get in on the profit-boosting bonanza. Going into a Costco or Target in October we saw in successive aisles candy for Halloween, harvest decorations for Thanksgiving, and rows of plastic Christmas trees and strings of twinkling lights—one stop early-bird shopping. Our warring minds have seeped into this Black Thursday and Friday phenomenon as each year we listen for the report of how many arrests, stabbings, and shootings happened this year. It’s the newest reality version of the Hunger Games, live on our ever increasing in size flat screen televisions.

And the echoes of the prophets of old—that’s p-r-o-P-H-E-t-s—echo against the annoying rendition of the Chipmunk’s singing “It’s Christmas time” over the loudspeakers at our local malls, whispering the words of a God who, amazingly, still hasn’t given up on us: “I will judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their guns into plowshares, and their switchblade knives into pruning hooks; shoppers shall not lift their fists against one another, neither shall they learn greed any more.”

Isaiah foreshadows generations with words of warning and judgment against greed, self-interest, political corruption, and prosperity religion that justifies our selfish behavior, followed by words of encouragement that all is amazingly not lost, that there is still hope with a God who envisions a different kind of humanity than what is portrayed on the six o’clock news. But that vision cannot become a reality without some hard intentional work. The people must want it, and want it bad enough to walk away from the craziness of the season and choose to live differently—a way forged through practices of peace, generosity, and hospitality.

You’re right, if you don’t nab that 60% off Xbox One game console, someone else will—so let them. Maybe your son or nephew (or you) don’t really need it—all the games teach war and violence anyway. “But that’s the way of the world, and if we only teach peace to our children they’ll get trampled.” To which the prophets with a “P-H” instead of an “F” would ask: “And what are you fighting for? The privilege of buying a game console while millions continue to die from hunger and AIDS?” You’re right, if you don’t buy those things, someone else will—so let them. But you, you can

be different and choose not to engage in the piranha-like retail feeding frenzy. You can choose to be the one who chooses differently, as Jesus teaches about Noah. The great mythic Noah chose to listen to God when God said the flood was coming. It wasn't easy. His neighbors chided and mocked him, but he kept building. When the HOA came after him, he kept building. When the city threatened to sue him, he kept building. He did not build that ark for the rich and powerful, but for those who could not save themselves when the floods came. It is an apt metaphor for us who choose to follow a Messiah who teaches us to love our enemies as well as our neighbors because God loves them as much as God loves us. We are not about saving ourselves, but creating arks of safety for those who are always more affected by life's stormy waters: the poor, the hungry, the sick, the marginalized including those caught up in cultures of crime for survival.

The lawyer-turned-author John Grisham wrote a book in 2001 that has captured the dreamy imaginations of so many who feel overwhelmed by this season's end of the year rituals. Its title the dream of many: *Skippping Christmas*. It was made even more real when it was turned into the movie *Christmas with the Kranks*, starring Tim Allen and Jamie Lee Curtis. The basic plot is simple: Luther and Nora Krank are recent empty-nesters. As they ponder what the holidays will be like, with Luther tallying up the thousands of dollars they spent in previous years and Nora walking nostalgically down memory lane of Christmases past, Luther comes up with an idea to break free from their money woes and the pain of the reality that Christmas will never again be the same—a cruise to the Bahamas, skipping Christmas altogether.

At the risk of being a plot spoiler (the movie is nine years old and the book is twelve, if you haven't seen it or read it by now, chances are you won't), the Kranks attempt to hide their plot to skip Christmas. But, their cover is blown when they don't follow suit with their neighbors by putting up Christmas decorations, only to find out on Christmas Eve that their daughter will be coming home for a surprise visit with her new fiancée. They scramble to re-create the Christmas of yesteryear only to discover it's not about the decorations, the presents, the trimmings, or even the traditional Christmas ham. As is usual, the book is better, but the point is still clear.

Waking up and staying awake in order to look around, read the newspaper, and take in all that is happening in the war zones of Africa, Syria, or Israel and Palestine, as well as rocky mountains of Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran, and the flood ravaged islands in the Philippines, let alone in our own streets and neighborhoods, *requires intentionality*. And engaging in the problems of today requires work. The world is not as Isaiah envisions, at least not yet and not widespread. Isaiah’s vision may never come to full fruition, but nothing will happen if we just sit back in our easy chairs, sipping on eggnog and letting someone else do it. That’s how we keep getting into these messes—we get lazy in our efforts to follow in the Way of Jesus by working for peace and prosperity for all people.

I urge you not to skip Christmas and, at the same time, to avoid giving yourself over to the Christmas frenzy that this season has become. Instead, I urge all of us to allow ourselves to be transformed by this season of Advent, training ourselves to be on the look out for God’s daily miracles of hope, for great and small signs of God’s work being done in others as well as in us. I urge us to stay awake and live into the vision of a people worshipping the Lord on the mountain, live into the vision of God’s kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven. In Jesus we have been given the story of God’s presence in us.

As one author writes: We are called to do more than stay awake and confront evil. We are called to also be on the lookout for God and goodness breaking into our world. We are called to live in eager expectation of that in-breaking here and now. Whenever people make peace instead of war, God is in our midst! Whenever people of faith break through the doctrinal divides to recognize we are worshipping the same God, God is in our midst. Whenever we choose not to give in to the belief that “The one with the most toys wins”, God is in our midst. When we stop long enough to recognize those small signs of goodness in our daily lives, God is in our midst.<sup>2</sup>

Yes, including today there are but 25 days until Christmas, when we celebrate this indwelling of God in our lives. How will you spend them? Is it possible to lift ourselves above the fray, choose not to

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<sup>2</sup> Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, “First Sunday of Advent”, *Preaching God’s Transforming Justice: A Lectionary Commentary, Year A* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 5.

participate in the craziness and instead seek to be intentional in our daily worship of a God who is faithfully with us all the time?

May the God of the ages, the God of Christmas joy, the God of peace, and the God of hope bless us, encourage us, and guide us on our spiritual journeys of faith in this season and the next.