

Rev. Lisa Schrott
11-30-25 First Sunday in Advent
Mark 13:24-27, 35-37 & Isaiah 2: 1-5
Vigilant Hope

Welcome to the season of Advent! Advent means “coming” or “arrival”. This word has a double significance, as in Advent we celebrate Christ’s coming into the world and look with longing for his coming again. We heard that expectation in the reading Julie just read from the Gospel of Mark. So the season of Advent begins with an emphasis on hope for our present day and the future, which includes final things – theologically, the fancy term *eschatology*. We watch and pray with expectant hope for the establishment of God’s justice and the return of the Prince of Peace. We hear that expectant hope in the words from the prophet Isaiah, as well as words of judgement.

The book of Isaiah opens with these words... “The vision of Isaiah son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah. Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth, for the Lord has spoken: I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me.” The remainder of Chapter One is filled with words of judgement against the people of Israel for their disobedience. Chapter 2 opens with a reintroduction of Isaiah followed by words of hope. Hear now these words from Isaiah Chapter 2 verses 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 plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war any more.

O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!
The Word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God.**

Judgement and hope are intertwined in the book of Isaiah. It is a rollercoaster of a ride to read the book straight through. The plunging depths of despair for disobedience and the thrilling ascension of what promises to be better days. I have felt that cycling of despair and judgement, hope and promise this week. The tragic shooting of two National Guard members

in Washington D.C. led the President to judge all recent immigrants from Afghanistan (as well as other nations) as suspect, despite the depths of the vetting that occurs for those with refugee and asylum status, those who become our newest neighbors.

These pronouncements left me despairing, just after I had experienced the profound hope of generosity and goodwill. On Tuesday night eleven of our youth and one of our college students home for Thanksgiving went shopping to buy items for the Giving Tree to support Refugee Services at Catholic Charities. They were thoughtful in the shopping thinking about what they would have liked when they were younger and what kinds of socks would keep feet warm in the winter. And they made sure the fragrances of the body washes were appealing. Their gifts were added to those overflowing from around the tree in Fellowship Hall coming from so much many generous hearts here at PCO. These gifts sit under the tree filled with the prayers you all wrote during the Agape meal, reflecting our commitment to keep our newest neighbors close to our hearts this season. High and low.

Just after I heard the pronouncement from the President, I opened the Friday mail at our house which included a letter from the Refugee Development Center (RDC). They shared that from January through September 2025, RDC supported 1826 newcomers to the Greater Lansing area, including 947 youth and 879 adults. Among the statistics shared, 332 youth participated in tutoring and 682 students in English classes. There were 813 home visits and 166 driving lessons. The letter included these words: "At a time when the world can feel unwelcoming, RDC strives to be a beacon of welcome. Our many partners demonstrate that welcome is something we build together. The Newcomer Center is the common thread – the place of hope of where families find connection, stability, and community."¹

The place of hope. The place of hope is something we build together. Both Isaiah and Mark were writing in a time, much like our own when hope could seem a far-off concept. A dream that was repeatedly dashed on the rocks of hard, cold reality. Dashed on the rocks of vengeance. Dashed on the rocks of inequity, maltreatment, prejudice and discrimination. A dream, nevertheless that was embraced because hope is grounded in the promises of God, and not in our life circumstances. As theologian Miroslav Volf says, "Hope is not based on the possibilities of the situation and on correct extrapolation about the future. Hope is grounded in the faithfulness of God and therefore on the effectiveness of God's promise."² We see this understanding of hope played out in the writings of the Gospel of Mark and the Prophet Isaiah.

The Gospel of Mark is thought to be written somewhere between 65-75 CE. This was a tumultuous time for the early followers of Jesus. It was just prior to – or maybe just after - the

¹ <https://refugeedevelopmentcenter.org/en/newcomercenter>

² Miroslav Volf. Not optimistic. *The Christian Century*. December 28, 2004. Online at <https://www.christiancentury.org/not-optimistic>

destruction of the great Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE. The Jewish – Roman War of 66-70 CE destabilized the region, shattering the lives and identity of the Hebrew people. The practice of the Jewish faith was in flux. Some established groups like the Sadducees had disappeared. Rabbinic Judaism was being established. The early Christian communities were defining their relationship with respect to these new structures in Judaism. And for those who were Jewish and followers of Christ, persecution was rampant. There was both social persecution, ostracism from families and local communities, as well as physical persecution including arrest and violence by the Roman authorities. The gospel writer Mark focuses on the need for perseverance in light of this suffering. To persevere one needed hope and the hope of Jesus' immanent return was a powerful beacon of light in an otherwise dark world. Mark's gospel has a sense of urgency. The people need to remain awake and watching for Jesus' return: "for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening or at midnight or at cockcrow or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake." Keep awake for God is about to intervene in human history. Be vigilant for there are evil powers active in the world. Don't take your eyes off the page, for Jesus' death and resurrection have begun the final stage of God's plan.

Isaiah too was telling the people that the vision that God enabled him to see "will come to pass in days to come" not in some far off time: "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."

Isaiah is referring to the Temple in Jerusalem, the Lord's house – set on the Temple Mount – and that people will desire to go to it – streaming in to learn the ways of the Lord and to walk in the Lord's path. From the Temple – from Jerusalem - instruction and wisdom shall pour forth. And boy was this instruction and wisdom needed.

The first 39 chapters of the book of Isaiah were written during an exceedingly challenging time in the world of the Hebrews during the 8th Century BCE. The Assyrian Empire was rising in prominence with powerful kings like Tiglath-Pileser III, Sargon II and Sennacherib conquering neighboring lands. In 722 BCE, the Northern Kingdom of Israel fell to Assyria. The Southern Kingdom of Judah survived by making an alliance with Assyria. The prophet Isaiah decried this reliance on a foreign power rather than God. Despite the shifting of the geopolitical winds in the region, it was a time of economic prosperity, with expanding agriculture, increased trade and growth in the towns and cities.

Like in many times and places, this economic growth was accompanied by profound corruption and social inequality. Much of Isaiah's prophecy was focused on denouncing the oppression of the laborers and the poor and decrying the corrupt practices like bribery by royal officials. In addition, Isaiah had harsh words about the religious practices of the day – the empty ritualism, the worship of foreign idols, the creeping adoption of religious practices

outside of those focused on the Lord God. For Isaiah, these practices were not just empty and devoid of meaning when they were not accompanied by ethical obedience, they were an affront to the Lord. They required swift and exacting judgement. The judgement included destruction of the people and their prosperity. And yet .. and yet there was hope. Hope through a remnant of the people who would survive and carry God's promise forward. And hope through a coming ruler who was both a righteous king and a suffering servant. A ruler who will bring peace. A ruler who "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."

This was the dream that Isaiah asked the people to embrace. A hope that the people needed to long for. As the authors of our Advent material from *Illustrated Ministry* share, "Advent begins not with certainty, but with longing. Isaiah's vision opens the season by naming both the brokenness of the present and the radical possibility of a different future. He envisions swords turned into plowshares and nations choosing to learn peace. This is not naïve optimism. It is defiant hope—hope that emerges in the shadow of empire and injustice, and still insists another way is possible. The hope of Advent is not about ignoring pain but confronting it with imagination. It sees the world's wounds clearly and chooses to dream anyway."³

In a commentary on the writings of the prophet Jeremiah, Mennonite Pastor Richard Kauffmann writes on the attributes of Christian hope saying that "Christian hope is not naïve as it is quite aware of the darkness around us. It doesn't flinch from or try to escape the darkness—it is not wishful thinking or mere optimism. Nor is Christian hope passive.... Christian hope is active. We live into the hope that Christ promises." ⁴

Vigilant hope. "Keep awake for opportunities to live into that hope. Advent hope doesn't wait for comfort to act. It stirs. It protests. It builds. It gathers people into movements of mercy and imagination, shaping peace with hands and hearts," as the authors of *The Will to Dream* ⁵ say. And as Isaiah reminds us, and as the Refugee Development Center reminds us, the place of hope is something we build together. Isaiah's words call us to communal work. All nations are invited. All people are called. We need to show up and participate. Hope is an active posture – like the servant waiting at their post for the master to return. We begin the Advent season with the reminder that in our vigilant, active, participatory hope the world will be changed. The world will be transformed. Swords will be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. "Hope is our refusal to let empire have the final word. Hope is the will to dream, and the courage to begin again."⁶

³ Illustrated Ministry. *The Will to Dream. Commentary & Preaching Guide*. illustratedministry.com

⁴ Richard A. Kauffman. In the Lectionary November 23, Reign of Christ/Christ the King (Jeremiah 23:1-6) The prophet Jeremiah knew about hard times. *The Christian Century*. November 17, 2025 <https://www.christiancentury.org/lectionary/november-23-reign-christ-christ-king-jeremiah-23-1-6>

⁵ Illustrated Ministry. *The Will to Dream. Commentary & Preaching Guide*. illustratedministry.com

⁶ *ibid*

This is why again and again and again we celebrate the season of Advent and light the candle of hope as we prepare for the Word made flesh in birth of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, the one who welcomed the stranger to the table, the one who healed us from conditions that separate us from community, the one who sacrificed his life so that we may know freedom from the bonds of sin and death. This is why we light the candle of hope, so that we may be a people of active and participatory hope, working to bring Christ healing throughout our broken and hurting world. As an affirmation this hope, I invite you to rise in body or an spirit as we join our hearts and voices together.