

Second Sunday in ADVENT

Welcome

Lighting of Advent candles

- Hymn CH4 284 - Hope is a candle

Hymn CH4 277 - Hark the glad sound!

Prayer, including the Lord's prayer

All age talk - What paths are we on?

- with maps - e.g. orienteering, street, road, rail, atlases
- maybe blank paper & pen, to draw an "Advent" map towards
Christmas/peace

Hymn CH4 516 - We are marching in the light of God

Bible readings: Isaiah 2:1-5; Matthew 24:36-44

Sermon

Hymn CH4 279 - Make way, make way

Prayer for others

Hymn CH4 543 - Longing for light

Blessing and sung Amen

Welcome

Lighting of Advent candles

- Hymn CH4 284 - Hope is a candle

Hymn CH4 277 - Hark the glad sound!

Prayer, including the Lord's prayer:

God of hope,
who has spoken through prophets,
who has kept your promises,
who wants everyone to be free.
We come to hear your words,
and to worship you.

Jesus,
you offered hope to people others left out,
you welcomed young and old to come close,
you healed through your living, your dying and your rising.
We come to learn from you,
and to follow you.

Holy Spirit,
who breathed life into all creation,
who inspires prophets and all people,
who wants to guide us throughout our lives.
We come to open ourselves to you,
and to be filled.

God of hope,
we come, knowing that we aren't always very good,
we come, knowing that the world is a bit of a mess,
we come, knowing that we need your help.
Please forgive us and help us.

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And in your love, you pour out forgiveness,
you invite all of us to come to you,
and as you make us new you send us out
to share your hope with others.

As we come, may we know your hope,
may we find your peace,
may we share your love.
Accept what we bring as we come,
what we bring of ourselves, our money, our hopes,
and guide us always, as you did when you gave us your prayer...

**Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come, your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours
now and for ever. Amen**

All age talk - What paths are we on?

Today I've brought some different types of map with me.

Who here has ever tried orienteering?

- orienteering map - paths, walls, fences, hills, open spaces

Other maps

- street map
- road map of Britain
- rail map of Scotland

Atlas - whole world - big, lots of maps, colours for countries, or images for mountains.

Children's atlas - lots of pictures, to show what you find in places.

Maps - show how to get to places, or show where we are. Sometimes lines, sometimes pictures or colours or symbols.

So if we are trying to get to somewhere, a map can be useful.

Advent - we start really thinking about going towards what? - Christmas, Jesus coming. If we were to make a map for Advent, what might it look like?

Different ways to travel - path, road, river, over mountains, sleigh?

Maybe need lights - because we are promised that God will help us see where we are going to - we walk in God's light.

And destination - peace - that's one of God's promises, for when God comes - that people will come from all directions, and find peace together.

Hymn CH4 516 - We are marching in the light of God

Bible readings: Isaiah 2:1-5; Matthew 24:36-44

SERMON

It is a difficult time in the Middle East. People's lives are endangered by war in and around Syria. Neighbouring countries and communities feel the threat of war spreading. It is unclear who is in the right, and which leaders to throw our lot in with. We don't know what to do to bring security for our own people, or peace to the region. Uncertainty and fear dominate, and hope is hard to find.

Does that sound familiar? Well, actually I wrote that as a summary of the time of the prophet Isaiah. And one reason our text from Isaiah 2 is still so relevant is because the circumstances of Judah 27 centuries ago are not that strange to us. Therefore the hope that we can find offered in these few verses can also be very real for us, here and now, this Advent.

The book of Isaiah was written and gathered together through very uncertain and threatening times. There was a series of dominant

regimes surrounding the small nation of Judah - the Assyrians, then the Babylonians, finally the Persians - and Judeans were pushed into an ever-shifting set of coalitions and treaties, for and against those mighty powers. Those mostly didn't work out too well, and so there were also decades of war, destruction, occupation and exile.

Jerusalem itself, and the Temple within it, was besieged, destroyed, then rebuilt over the period the book of Isaiah was put together.

The world of Isaiah and the people of Judah was troubled. It was either at war, or preparing for war. It wasn't clear where to turn for allies or answers. And we could say exactly the same about the world we live in now.

If we look to Syria and Iraq, and the overspill of that conflict, it is very unclear who are really our allies, or who should be. If we look at the suffering of civilians we are greatly troubled but don't know what to do. And if we look at the consequences, and the streams of people leaving their homes seeking safety, we find Europe reacting with our own fear.

It is into such times that these verses are offered. It is in the darkness of a troubled and suffering world that a light of hope is shone. It is to those streams of people seeking hope, and to all of us seeking guidance, that God speaks and offers a vision. And God then invites all people to live in God's ways of peace and hope.

And what a vision it is that God offers the people of Judah. No matter how hopeless their current circumstances seem, in days to come God will bring transformation. All people will be drawn to God and be part of that transformation. There will be streams of people - neither fleeing for their lives, nor marching to war. These streams of people - many peoples, all nations - will be drawn to God. Streams of people - friends and enemies, strangers and foreigners - will be drawn to learn from God. God will be recognised by all people, and in humility and humanity they will go to God that "he will teach us what he wants us to do."

It's a vision that taps into lots of familiar imagery. God is encountered on a holy mountain. The holiness of God is on high, compared with the lowliness of humans. Wisdom is sought in inaccessible places.

But this vision also shows new things. It is not a solitary pilgrimage up the mountain - it is streams of people, throngs of humanity, walking together to learn from one God. It is not just a vision for Judah and Jerusalem, but is for all peoples everywhere. And because of that universality, the transformation that comes is amazing, beyond our wildest hopes of peace.

The hope offered is that God will speak to all peoples, and settle disputes between nations. God will bring justice to those who need it. God will find a way of peace where human coalitions have failed. God will bring a true peace, such that people don't even need to prepare for war. Weapons will be transformed into tools so that everyone can be fed.

In the vision, all of this comes about because people first come seeking the ways of God. But the vision then becomes reality when they go and walk in those ways. Those streams of people come up the mountain to hear God, but then they must go back down and live differently - all those different peoples living in God's ways of peace and hope.

Now that sounds lovely - but for the people hearing it, it must have seemed very improbable. The threat from neighbouring powers was always real, no matter which empire they were living alongside. Other nations had other gods they turned to, they wouldn't ever turn to the God of Israel & Judah. And it would be extreme foolishness not to be prepared for war. Verses 2 to 4 may offer something to hang on to, but it's a distant hope for far-off days to come.

Yet verses 1 and 5 remind us that it's not delivered as just some distant dream. In verse 1 we are told this is a message for a

particular man, to be delivered to particular people, in their real circumstances. Then in verse 5, we shift from "days to come" right into the present.

"Now, descendants of Jacob, let us walk in the light which the Lord gives us!"

Now. In Judah and Jerusalem, in the times you are hearing this prophecy, in the places you are under threat - now, let us walk in the light that the Lord gives us!

God invites his people, there and then, to walk in God's ways. It might seem foolish. It may appear dangerous. It will certainly be difficult. But God calls the people who hear his word, and see his vision, to walk in ways of peace and hope. And if they do that, the transformation begins. The transformation begins - from fear and war, to hope for peace.

That is a transformation that is still needed so badly in our world. In Jerusalem; in the regions around it; across a world of shifting alliances, of violence and the threat of violence - don't we so need to hear words of peace and hope? At a time of year when darkness can make it harder to face all that life brings, don't we need some light shining? In a season when divisions in families and communities can be more deeply felt, don't we also hope to walk alongside others in a better way?

God offers us that better way. God calls us to come. And Advent reminds us that God comes, and will come again, to show us the ways to follow. In days that have been, God came to earth in Jesus and taught the streams of people who came to learn from him. In days that have been, Jesus was raised up on a cross, suffering terribly at the hands of the powerful. In days that have been, Jesus was raised up from death, raised higher than the power of death and fear, showing that hope is stronger and that hope is real.

And while those days have been - just as the days of Isaiah have been - in Advent we also look forward to the days to come. We can look forward based on the hope of those past days. In being born with us, God came alongside the streams of people seeking hope, safety, and guidance. In facing death and rising again, God shone a light in the darkness of our fear. And in promising to come again, to complete the work begun, God helps us trust in that vision.

So we can hope, because of God's past actions. And we can hope, because we do see God's light in the darkness of the world in the present. Sometimes it may be very tiny glimpses, but our Advent candles remind us that even a small light can make a difference. I think that when we look at the streams of people moving around our world, we find many such glimpses of light and hope.

There is hope when neighbouring nations take millions of people in, overcoming divisions to open their communities to those in even greater need.

There is hope when people travel across the world to the Greek islands to help refugees. Teams wait all night on dark beaches, with a lit fire bringing warmth and light, ready to welcome any who survive the Mediterranean.

There is hope when local people gather clothes for Moray Supports Refugees to support the most vulnerable as they travel, and when they arrive here to live.

In the darkness of fear, war and barbed-wire fences, and alongside the less-welcoming policies of governments, these can all seem small things. But every light helps people to walk forward together in hope, as God leads us.

So we can find hope - because God invites us to hope, God invites all people to live in God's ways, God calls us to walk in the light.

How? How do we keep living out Advent hope? How do we walk in the light of the Lord? Again, we can turn to the vision shared in Isaiah 2 for pointers.

Firstly, the people are willing to go to God. We must acknowledge our own need of God and of God's guidance. Realising how little we can do or understand on our own, we turn to God.

We can also recognise that our search for God is shared with others, that none of us have all the answers. Together we can seek what is holy and true, what is wise and life-giving, what is hopeful and just.

When we turn to God, seeking God's ways, we then need to listen in humility. There is no point in climbing the mountain just to ignore what we learn at the top. But if we are open to possibilities, ready to hear God's word and see God's vision, we can learn God's ways.

Then, having seen and heard from God, we need to walk in God's ways. It's not enough to hear or know stuff about God - we need to live it. It's not possible to stay on top of the mountain enjoying the view - we need to come down and live our lives. It's not enough to keep such knowledge as a personal matter - we need to let God's light shine on our lives as communities and nations. For God invites all people to live in God's ways, and those ways do bring transformation - of human lives, and of the whole world. Peace can come between and within nations and communities. Weapons of destruction can be transformed into useful tools. People can stop learning the ways of war, and learn to live hopefully.

This Advent, I invite you to hear God's invitation, and intentionally find a way of living hopefully in the world. Find a way of bringing God's light into your dealings with other people. Perhaps that will be overcoming a division with someone close - reaching out, to journey alongside them as you both seek the peace and hope of Christmas. Maybe that will be an action for some of those streams of people fleeing their homes and seeking safety - making a donation or learning their stories. Perhaps it will be in simple things, like smiles and hugs shared on a dark winter's day. How can you live out God's hope and light for someone else struggling with fear, uncertainty or darkness? - for God invites all people to live in God's ways of peace and hope.

Here is the message which God gave to Isaiah son of Amoz about Judah and Jerusalem.

Here is that same message, which God gives to you and to me.

In days to come all peoples shall stream to God.

They will seek God, so that they can walk in God's ways.

And so God's will will be done on earth, God will bring justice and peace, God will transform the world.

Have this hope, in your days of darkness and fear. Have this hope for this world and all its people. Have this hope, trusting in God who is with us, has come to us and promises to come again.

And now, right now, let us walk in the light of the Lord.

Now, right now, let us live out God's hope.

Hymn CH4 279 - Make way, make way

Prayer for others

God of now,
of all peoples now,
of this hurting world now,
we turn to you,
longing for peace to transform your world, now.
We look at the streams of people trapped on and around the borders of Europe,
or risking their lives to get there.
We know of the huddles of people surviving in war-torn villages, towns and cities,
and those who are trying to bring them help.
We hear of the communities of people facing famine because of drought and flood,
unable to eat or to plant seeds for the future.
Open our hearts, and the hearts of all in leadership,
that we might push for true welcome to be offered,
for real peace to be sought,
and for useful aid to reach those in need.

God of all,

of all peoples,
of all nations everywhere,
we turn to you,
longing for peace to bring all people together, now.
We look at your Church, divided about how to read your Word,
or hurt by each others' past actions.
We know of the divisions between people of different faiths and traditions,
which overflow into political and cultural exclusion.
We hear of the violence and persecution faced by some people of faith,
growing from ignorance, injustice and hatred.
Open our hearts, and the hearts of all people,
that we might all seek you and your ways
in the company of others,
and be guided by you into true peace.

God of days to come,
of tomorrow,
of passing seasons,
we turn to you,
longing for peace in the hearts of all.
We look around and within us, and know the struggles we face
with bad habits, addictions and challenging relationships.
We know of the uncertainty that comes with financial pressures,
often worse in the run up to Christmas.
We hear and feel loss,
of health and wellbeing, and of people we love.
Open our hearts, and the hearts of all in our communities,
that we might know your presence,
and share your hope,
and be led by you into deep peace.

God of now,
we come as we are,

with our hopes and fears,
with our questions and visions.
As we seek you, may we find you,
and follow in your paths now and always,
through your life-changing Spirit,
and Jesus, our Lord and friend,
Amen

Hymn CH4 543 - Longing for light

Blessing and sung Amen

Now, let us walk in the light of the Lord.
Now, let us live out God's hope.
Now, let us seek the paths of peace.
And may the blessing of God,
Father, Son & Holy Spirit,
be upon us, and go with us to all those we meet,
now and always...