

What Are We Hoping For?: First Advent

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NPMC - Nov. 27, 2022

Scripture: Isaiah 2:1-5, Psalm 122, Romans 13:11-14

Hymns: O Come, O Come Immanuel - VT 210; Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus - VT 218

Psalm 122

¹ I was glad when they said to me,
“Let us go to the house of the LORD!”
² Our feet are standing
within your gates, O Jerusalem.
³ Jerusalem—built as a city
that is bound firmly together.
⁴ To it the tribes go up,
the tribes of the LORD,
as was decreed for Israel,
to give thanks to the name of the LORD.
⁵ For there the thrones for judgment were set up,
the thrones of the house of David.
⁶ Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:
“May they prosper who love you.
⁷ Peace be within your walls
and security within your towers.”
⁸ For the sake of my relatives and friends
I will say, “Peace be within you.”
⁹ For the sake of the house of the LORD our God,
I will seek your good.

Isaiah 2:1-5

² The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.
² 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.
³ 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.
⁴ 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.
⁵ O house of Jacob,
come, let us walk
in the light of the LORD!

Romans 13:11-14

¹¹ Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is already the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; ¹² the night is far gone; the day is near. Let us then throw off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; ¹³ let us walk decently as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in illicit sex and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴ Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

My book club read a very unique novel this month: Louise Erdrich's *Future Home of the Living God*. It's a dystopian, science fiction story told from the point of view of Cedar, a young Indigenous woman who has been adopted and raised by white, hippy parents. She finds herself pregnant and unmarried at a time when evolution has started going backward (there's the sci-fi part), and decides that's the time to go and find her Indigenous birth-family on the reserve, whom she has never met. The world is ending, and she decides to get re-acquainted with her roots. In a story full of Advent references (she discovers her birth name is Mary, jokes about the father of her baby being an angel, her due date is Christmas Day, etc.), Cedar/Mary finds great hope in her unborn child, even though strange things are happening all around her. Part of her hope comes from her biological mother's husband, Eddy, who despite having no direct connection to her, becomes a father figure to her (in the style of the biblical Joseph!). They have this reassuring, even comforting conversation at one point:

"Since you know so much then, Eddy, what's going to happen?' I ask.
"[Indigenous folks] have been adapting since before 1492 so I guess we'll keep adapting."
"But the world is going to pieces."
"It's always going to pieces."
"This is different."
"It is always different. We'll adapt."¹

So at the end of the world, Cedar-Mary finds hope in the words of her non-father whom she's just met and in her unborn child.

Science fiction is such an interesting genre of writing – and one which (bear with me here) has a lot in common with biblical apocalyptic literature. Both have been misunderstood as making predictions about the future. But rather than foretelling the future, both genres invite us to think about the future in order to tell us more about

¹ Louise Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017), 28.

ourselves – our hopes and fears, what ultimately makes us human, what we’re willing to work for, what we want to see this world become – and not become. Even though we are not facing reverse evolution as in the novel, our world does feel like it’s falling apart in various ways (whether because of “fake news” and fear-mongering, war, or the climate emergency). In the midst of all this, what are our hopes?

All three of our Scripture passages for this morning get at different examples of ancient hopes, and tell us something about the characteristics of Advent hope. Psalm 122 is a prayer for peace, but not just peace in general. It is a prayer specifically for peace to come to the city of Jerusalem.

- ⁶ Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:
“May they prosper who love you.
⁷ Peace be within your walls
and security within your towers.”
⁸ For the sake of my relatives and friends
I will say, “Peace be within you.”

Now on one hand, this emphasis makes a lot of sense, especially considering that Jerusalem literally means “city of peace” (“salem” being related to the Hebrew word *shalom* and the Arabic word *salaam*). And yet, Jerusalem has been the site of so much conflict over the millennia, both in biblical times and today. In our Scripture passages from today alone, Jerusalem is facing siege by the Assyrian army and occupation and imminent destruction by Rome, respectively. How can this city be a symbol of peace?

Commentator Jason Byassee notes that this Psalm reminds us of the “scandal of particularity.” This is a prayer for a very concrete peace in a certain, real place, an earthly city (not some future, idealized, or imaginary place). “This psalm gives a literal directive like few psalms do: pray for Jerusalem. Right now. Stop what you’re doing and

pray for its peace, for on its peace hangs the peace of the word.”² There is a certain emphasis on our hopes not being some kind of other-worldly dreams, but specific, embodied hopes in particular times and places. Theologian Kelley Nikondeha speaks about changing her prayer practices to reflect this turn to embodiment and the particular. She writes, “My most recent act of embodied prayer is the ancient practice of turning toward Jerusalem to pray. I discern the direction of the holy city, face her, and pray. ... Historically, Jews, Christians, and even Muslims prayed facing Jerusalem. The practice of the faithful centred on that hallowed place. I recognize that the modern Jerusalem carries complexity, a holy and hotly contested city divided between faiths and factions. Maybe it’s curious to make it central to my prayer life.” And yet, she reminds us, the prophets have long spoken of hopes for Jerusalem to become the New Jerusalem, the holy city in which God’s ways are made manifest.³

One of these prophetic passages is from Isaiah 2, where Jerusalem becomes a centre of peace not just for itself or just for the nation of Israel, but for “all nations.”

“all the nations shall stream to it.

³ 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 [God] may teach us [God’s] ways
and that we may walk in [God’s] paths.”

These are familiar words, a familiar vision of peace. What we might forget about this first part of Isaiah, however, is that it’s being written in a time of extreme danger and war. The northern part of Israel has already been conquered by Assyria, and those Israelites who remain have fled and taken refuge in the Southern kingdom of Judah.

² Jason Byassee, “Commentary on Psalm 122,” *Working Preacher*, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/first-sunday-of-advent/commentary-on-psalm-122-5>

³ Kelley Nikondeha, “Embodied Prayer,” in *The Rhythm of Prayer: A Collection of Meditations for Renewal*, ed. Sarah Bessey (New York: Convergent, 2021), 130-131.

These words come from a time of “great suffering, anxiety, and imminent imperial conquest,” speaking to “a nation facing an uncertain future.” It’s in this context that Isaiah speaks these profound words of hope that echo down to us across the millennia. Here there is “a hopeful time promised amid a dire present,” says commentator Joel Kemp. In the midst of siege, and war, and threats, Isaiah speaks of a time when the mountain of God (another term for Jerusalem) will be an international beacon of hope, when the nations will gather on it to make the opposite of war: to turn their weapons into tools for growing food and sustaining, rather than taking, life. Even the language of nations “streaming” to Jerusalem is a play on words, a reminder of springs of refreshing, thirst-quenching water or the living water that Jesus offers in the Gospel of John.⁴ In a time of war and siege when provisions are scarce, Isaiah dares to speak hopeful words of a future where the people’s literal hunger and thirst for peace will be abundantly met by God.

Our third Scripture passage comes from a time much later in history, fast forwarding about eight centuries to the early church. And yet some of the same hopes remain. The apostle Paul here speaks words of encouragement to a fledgling congregation in Rome, the very heart of the oppressive and brutal Roman Empire. This congregation was struggling with divisions among those members who were Jewish Christians and those who were Gentile Christians. How were they to overcome these differences and get along? Paul speaks to them of salvation coming like the dawning of a new day, “encourag[ing] them to glimpse the hope of restoration that is near and to

⁴ Joel B. Kemp, “Commentary on Isaiah 2:1-5,” *Working Preacher*, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/first-sunday-of-advent/commentary-on-isaiah-21-5-6>

change their attitudes and behaviours to live into that hope.”⁵ But notice that they are not advised to simply be patient and wait for God to bring about the hoped-for salvation. Instead, they are invited to “put on Christ” – to essentially dress up as Christ, to act like Christ in the world. Medieval mystic Teresa of Avila spoke about this in terms of being “the hands and feet of Christ” in the world. In so doing, these early Christians are encouraged to help usher in that for which they are hoping. Theirs is an empowering and active hope – not unlike the slogan: be the peace you want to see in the world (attributed to Gandhi).

This invitation is also extended to us as we read these words of hope many centuries later. Though our fears and obstacles are different, they are not that different. Those hopes seemed no more likely in those times and places than they do today; placing our hope in the birth of a tiny baby in a world torn apart by empires seemed no less foolish then than it does today. That’s why they become taken up into Advent hope: a hope that is concrete and real, incarnate in bodies and history; a hope that is inclusive, offering blessing and peace to all nations, the whole groaning planet; and a hope that empowers us to take part in making these hopes come true in our near future. Pastor Isaac Villegas speaks of Advent as our reminder that “this world is the place where God will dwell. The home of God is here, on Earth. Our lives are not foreign to God; earthly life is not alien to God’s life.... The gospel [or good news] as we approach Bethlehem during Advent, is this: to know again – this year, with all that has changed in us, with all that has changed in our world – that the one who created us also loves us.

⁵ Advent Week 1 of *Restoration is Near*, Mennonite Church USA Advent At Home 2022, <https://www.mennoniteusa.org/resource-portal/resource/advent-at-home/>

This love has been made flesh. We will know God's incarnate love when we love each other."⁶ That is our hope. AMEN

⁶ <https://anabaptistworld.org/advent-of-jesus-will-shake-the-foundations-of-the-world/>