Nutana Park Mennonite Church

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**What Are We Waiting For?**

That title, suggested in MennoMedia’s resource material, has been troubling me ever since I first read the lectionary texts for today. What are we waiting for? The question seemed to gather into itself all kinds of loose threads of anxiety that had been entangling me in the last months: the daily drama of the impeachment proceedings (“what **are** you waiting for, you blind leading the blind? Can’t you recognize evidence when you see it?”); the strange convergence of finding in my hands several books about Jesus, all of which painted a political portrait of him that I would not have recognized in my early Sunday School days, just as our Adult Education class had a series on religion and politics; and we were facing a federal election in which we were hoping . . . for what exactly, many of us weren’t sure. I kept remembering a suggestion made by a guest speaker in Adult Ed: next time you talk to a political candidate, ask her how she envisions the common good, ask him what a healthy society looks like.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, the liturgical season for awaiting the birth of a baby. But if the books I’ve been reading are accurate in their descriptions of the political scene in Palestine in 4 B.C.E., the probable date of Jesus’ birth, what the Jewish population of that occupied territory was waiting for was someone to lead them into armed insurrection against the hated Roman legions and all their self-interested collaborators—under the miraculous guidance of Yahweh, of course. Then devout Jews could claim their own land again and worship freely at a newly purified temple. They could obey their sacred Torah and experience peace and prosperity again. That’s what the waiting was for before the birth of Mary’s son, perhaps not unlike the longing for peace and safety among Syrians today, or among current Palestinians, or among the Kurds, divided by borders established by those who had little idea of who the Kurds were or what their culture was.

Our lectionary passages for today are all infused with such anxious waiting—for the upending of oppressive hierarchies, for an end to brutal exploitation and fear. Their great expectations tipped upward into dreaming big – this is visionary writing. I can hear, in my mind, Martin Luther King, Jr.’s famous speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Recently I listened to that speech again, and heard the echoes of the prophet Micah (with an African-American accent), “Let justice roll down like the waters and righteousness as streams of water.” King’s call to the ages was not to give up hope: “Although we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream.” In his imagined egalitarian, unprejudiced society, black boys and girls would walk with white boys and girls to the same schools, tired black travelers would be welcomed at whatever hotel they stopped at, restaurants would serve both black and white patrons, even mixed at some tables, universities would educate black and white students together.

This is a good time to hear King’s speech—now when the balance of power in the world seems to be shifting in uncomfortable ways, when countries once known for their democracy are deeply divided, when forced migrations of populations result in frightening talk about “us” against “them.” We need to be reminded to hold onto an ideal vision of a good society, even in the midst of seeming hopelessness.

“In the last days,” says Isaiah, as he begins his version of “I have a dream.” For me, the words “the last days” still have a whiff of sulphur about them, the threat of final judgment. According to Robert Alter, though, a well-known Jewish scholar, the line should be translated as “And it shall happen in future days. . . .” This is not an “end times” scenario,” but a specific hope for a realizable future for Israelite society.

Certainly, the present was intolerable. In the “now” of this passage, the nation was under imminent threat of invasion and occupation by the Assyrians, who were aggressively expanding their empire through military force. The reputation of the Assyrian army as appallingly brutal had surely gone ahead of them into the territories of Israel and Judah. The people would have known all too well what to expect from them.

Yet just as Martin Luther King, Jr., could say, despite the prejudice and abuses that had provoked the Civil Rights Movement, “I have a dream!” so Isaiah says, in effect, “I have a dream.” And he imagines details as startling as anything King envisioned: swords recycled into plowshares, spears turned into pruning hooks, no more trained soldiers. Suppose we think of bombs being recycled into solar panels, and tanks repurposed into harvesters for soy beans. And it’s not only tools that need to be reborn, but attitudes as well. Imagine our current politicians and national leaders of whatever sort agreeing to close down all military academies, to decommission all armaments, and to stop thinking about other nations as enemies.

What assumptions, or beliefs, can give birth to such a utopian vision? A surprising universality and a conviction that the God of Jacob is the one and only God. “He shall judge among the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples.” In other words, what Isaiah sees in some possible future is a theocracy that includes all nations without denying their autonomy or peoplehood. And how will that theocracy work? Through the centrality of faith and the laws of God: “Come, let us go up to the mount of the LORD, / To the house of Jacob’s God, /that He may teach us of His ways / and that we may walk in His paths.. . . . Come, let us walk in the light of the LORD.”

That beautiful picture of walking through the darkness by the light of God, who has taught his people how to live together in peace, tugs at my heart, even as my more cynical self wants to ask a few practical questions: What does it mean to “walk”? It’s not literal, of course—the metaphor of a journey down a path with a lamp as guidance is as old as walking with lamps. It’s all of life itself as journey, lit by the lamp of God’s laws.

It includes getting up in the morning, rearranging one’s robes, leaving the tent to walk out to wherever the river is or wherever the temporary latrine has been dug. It includes getting food with which to break one’s fast and giving orders to the servants or carrying out such orders, depending on one’s place in society. It includes behaving correctly when the tribal lord comes to take a lamb, or when the nearby merchant claims the space you had for your tent with its blankets for sale. Everything is included, from having sex with your spouse to negotiating a trade with the traveling merchant, from plowing your field right up to the boundary marker—and no further—to harvesting the grapes and making the wine, remembering to pay your servants properly and to leave some grapes at the edge of the rows for poor. Nothing is excluded from this walking in the light, unless it be the steps one takes into the darkness, when greed or anger holds sway.

But how shall one walk in the paths of the way of the LORD, after the Assyrians have burned the villages and destroyed the crops and starved the city? When our current democratic governments seem mired in off-stage influence-peddling and on-stage rancour? When systems, even locally, seem to guarantee continued poverty for some and unchecked privilege for others? There’s a lot of interpretive work to be done here.

Still, the dream persists. A dream that all people of all nations will be equally welcomed into the house of the LORD, that war and conflict shall be no more. And, like the frustrated peasants of 4 B.C.E, I want to ask: this waiting for the ideal society—must **we** take action or do we just wait patiently for God to intervene and deliver a new government and acceptable law and order, along with a workable economy?

A full answer to that question would require a careful reading of all of Scripture really, both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament. I will dare to suggest only two partial and tentative answers, based on the lectionary texts.

The first concerns the individual’s role in making the dream come true, in bringing about the kingdom. Isaiah, in Chapter Two, promises that God will “teach us God’s ways” / so that we “can walk in God’s paths.” Elsewhere in that sprawling, multi-authored book, we find more specific instructions: “maintain justice, do what is right, keep the Sabbath, avoid evil, care for the poor, bind up the broken-hearted, comfort the mourning, be humble and contrite.” As I think about those commands, I wonder how cause and effect work out here. Does our precious narrative of a possible future somehow shape us now to fit into that good society when it comes to pass? Or do our daily small choices in themselves bring such a good society closer?

Paul’s instructions in Romans would seem to say that yes, our daily choices do matter – a lot. His historical context was as dire as Isaiah’s. For Paul, “the present time” is approximately 52 – 57 C.E. Intermittent Jewish uprisings against the Romans’ ruthless and often blasphemous control had occurred repeatedly, for decades, under various self-proclaimed peasant messiahs. Each had been met by brutal repression and more crucifixions. By 66 C.E. the Roman government had had enough of the stubborn Jews, and the army launched an all-out assault on Jerusalem and environs, placed the city under siege, and eventually burnt it to the ground, turning the temple into powder. Jewish resistance was utterly crushed by 70 C.E and even the name of the city of Jerusalem, within two decades, had disappeared from Roman records.

Paul and his fellow believers, in these tense times, were desperately waiting for Christ to return at once and establish his kingdom on earth, understandably so. With eager expectancy, Paul writes, “the hour has already come,” “the night is nearly over.” His instructions for the remaining waiting time? They could have been taken from Isaiah, but Paul writes in prose, not poetry, and he’s not bothering much with metaphors, except for one military one—“let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.” And the armor of light will help us to behave decently – no self-indulgent and hopeless sins like drunkenness and immorality and debauchery. Notice that he includes in that list dissension and jealousy, which likewise undermine self-discipline and the ability to think clearly, let alone to think clearly about the needs of others. We need to “clothe ourselves in Jesus Christ” (another metaphor), and live as if the new kingdom has already come. Make choices consistent with that vision of a good society, in which the selfishness of using other people and degrading both them and the earth itself has no place. Live into your dream of the good society! Our visions for the future shape us as much as we shape our visions.

My second answer to the question of how we are involved in active waiting for the coming of that future kingdom concerns the difficulty of maintaining the clarity and integrity of that vision. Isaiah’s poem already implies that such active waiting is made possible only within a community: “Come,” says Isaiah to “many peoples,” Come, let **us** go up to the mountain of the LORD.” Psalm 122, which we read earlier, is even clearer, although the focus is more narrowly on “the tribes of the LORD.”

The “now” of this psalm is not a particular time, but a repeated, ritualized occasion – the pilgrim journey of the worshippers of the LORD to the temple of Jerusalem, depicted in the opening slide. Jerusalem is “compacted together” or as Robert Alter translates it “joined fast together,” a possible reference to the wall around Jerusalem that not only protects against the outside world but brings together those within its walls.

While the specific prayer of this psalm – “pray for the peace of Jerusalem” – could seem self-interested and narrow, it does emphasize an important central beginning point, “May there be peace within your walls / and security within your citadels.” Without that settled, worshipful core, can peace ever radiate outward? And in our time, particularly, having peace in the city of Jerusalem would be a huge step toward peace in the world, simply by virtue of offering an example and ending the conflicts that have surrounded the city from the time of King David and on.

The most crucial point of this psalm for me is the communality that it assumes as foundational. How can we hang onto the goal of a just and equitable society, created through the love of God? Through the ritual gathering together of the people of God, during which we are taught the ways of God and encouraged to walk in the light of the LORD.

In a recent meeting of the women’s bible study group, we had discussed the radical call of Jesus to challenge “hierarchies, distinctions, and discriminations” (Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography,* 103), as he was doing with his free healing and inclusionary meals with sinners and provocative parables against the exploitative Temple aristocracy. We talked about what that might mean in a time when we fret about everything from the plight of the homeless in our streets to the struggle for freedom in the streets of Hong Kong, from the growing economic gap between the rich and the poor to deliberate inflammation of personal grievances through rampant disinformation. Then someone asked, “so what does going to church have to do with living out Jesus’ selfless love?”

That question has remained with me and has shaped my reading of Psalm 122. On one level, the psalm is a ritualized pilgrimage for insiders, for those who were qualified to enter the Temple of Jerusalem. On another, broader level, because the poet assumes that communality is foundational, Psalm 122 works against the ongoing human temptation to radicalize dreams of a better society into violent and exclusionary movements. Just as the Jewish people met yearly to acknowledge their sins and to renew their worship of Yahweh, the God of Jacob, being thus reminded of the law and taught how to “walk in his paths,” so within the church, we gather with fellow believers to learn what it means, today, to walk in the light of the LORD. Only so, within a community of integrity, can the vision of a peaceful future where swords can be beaten into plowshares be kept alive and honest. The necessary and ongoing interpretive work cannot be done alone. And so we wait – together—encouraging one another, even as we look for and live out, daily, the presence of the Kingdom in all our comings and goings. Amen.