

**“In Days To Come”**  
**Isaiah 2:1-5**

In the Dr. Seuss book, *Oh, the Places You'll Go!*, there is a section called “The Waiting Place ... for people just waiting.”

Waiting for a train to go  
or a bus to come, or a plane to go  
or the mail to come, or the rain to go  
or the phone to ring, or the snow to snow  
or waiting around for a Yes or No  
or waiting for their hair to grow.  
Everyone is just waiting.

Waiting for the fish to bite  
or waiting for wind to fly a kite  
or waiting around for Friday night  
or waiting, perhaps, for their Uncle Jake  
or a pot to boil, or a Better Break  
or a string of pearls, or a pair of pants  
or a wig with curls, or Another Chance.  
Everyone is just waiting.

We all spend a considerable amount of our lives just waiting and we don't like it. We are an impatient people. The season of Advent is largely about waiting and is, therefore, not a very popular season on the Christian calendar. But Advent's not *just* waiting for any old thing. . It's not even about waiting for another go-round of our various Christmas traditions which seldom are new. For many of us how we celebrated Christmas last year is pretty much how we'll celebrate Christmas this year. No, Advent is about waiting for something totally new. **“In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and ... all the nations shall stream to it.”**<sup>i</sup> That is, Advent is about waiting for the re-creation of the world as God originally intended it to be.

Is that a ridiculous pipe-dream or a vision? Isaiah is clear about it – it is a vision for the word he proclaimed was something he *saw* concerning Judah and Jerusalem. It is a vision that God's people are called to embrace and live out. Isaiah saw Jerusalem as high and lifted up. He saw Jerusalem [Zion] as the source of instruction for how the people of the world could live in peace.

You may find that a most preposterous vision to embrace. For thousands of years, and most notably for the past couple of generations, Jerusalem as been the focus of a tug-of-war between competing nations and religions. Everyone wants to claim Jerusalem as their own. Can

anything so fractured and torn apart be expected to be a source of healing? Those of us who try to follow the Crucified One should know the answer. In referring to the kind of death by which he would die, Jesus said, **“When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.”**<sup>ii</sup> It sounds foolish, but we know such foolishness if the power of God.<sup>iii</sup> You see, Jerusalem is not only a city, it is a symbol for the presence of God. Jerusalem (that is, God) isn’t *owned* by anyone. Jerusalem, which most probably means “city of peace,” was not a place for any one people or religion of the world to conquer, rather it is the place where all people are to be conquered by the Spirit of God. That’s why Isaiah says that the nations will stream to Jerusalem – not to seize it for themselves, but because there, in the presence of the Lord, and only there, will disputes among nations be settled and only there will nations learn how to change from a war economy to a peace economy.

In the year that he died, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. compared the world to a global house. He quoted an author’s idea for a novel where a widely separated family inherited a house in which they all had to learn to live together. King said, “This is the great new problem of (human) kind. We’ve inherited a large house, a great ‘world house’ in which we have to live together – black and white, Eastern and Western, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Muslim and Hindu – a family ... separated in ideas, culture and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace.”<sup>iv</sup>

Perhaps Dr. King’s “world house” is the origin of the Dr. Phil House where on some of his TV programs, Dr. Phil brings together disparate and desperate people and puts them into a single house to learn to live together for a period of time. I really don’t care for that aspect of his programs because it seems so off-the-wall and such a hopeless endeavor. So is, some say, another attempt by President Bush, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to try once again to work out a settlement whereby Palestinians and Israelis can live side by side in peace. The skeptics predict disaster if another such attempt is made and fails. They worry that the United States would lose all influence in the region should it fail. But has anyone ever considered the greater disaster that might result from not even trying? Not to try is to pull in the opposite direction in which God is pulling. Is it not better to try to live out God’s vision for the world rather than by any one of the multitude of human visions that only tear the world apart? Did not Jesus tell us to seek first God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness and let the chips fall where they may?<sup>v</sup>

The image of Jerusalem being lifted up and all the nations streaming to it suggests a river flowing uphill rather than downhill. It’s not the way nature works, but that’s the point. It will take a reversal of nature’s course, and human nature’s way of doing things, for nations to learn how to beat swords into plowshares and weapons of mass destruction, our own included, into life-giving instruments. We dare not delude ourselves into thinking that this or any one peace process will suddenly reverse two generations of hatred or thousands of years of human history. If there is a little boy in your family’s life, you no doubt have heard about Bob the Builder! Among the many sayings of this cartoon character: “Can we fix it? Yes we can!” With all due respect to Bob, “We can’t fix it. No we can’t!”

Yesterday morning's newspaper carried a story about the latest encyclical from the Pope. He is critical both of atheism and the almost exclusive emphasis of Christianity regarding personal salvation while ignoring the salvation / transformation of the world. Titled, "Saved by Hope," he says, "In the suffering and misery of daily life, Christianity provides the faithful with a *journey of hope* to the Kingdom of God. We must do all we can to overcome suffering, but to banish it from the world is not in our power. Only God is able to do this."<sup>vi</sup>

Bob the Builder can't fix the world, but God can and, in God's own time, God will. And so we wait, not in despair, but with much hope. With an urgency born of this hope, we strive for a better world.<sup>vii</sup> That's why some of you staffed a soup kitchen in Philadelphia yesterday. That's why some of the men of our church will distribute Christmas presents to inmates at Graterford prison. That's why about 100 of you will volunteer during the month of January to provide hospitality for some homeless families. We are under no delusions that we can fix the world, but at the very least, we want to be pulling in the same direction that God is pulling.

Henri Nouwen writes:

Are the great visions of the ultimate peace among all people and the ultimate harmony of all creation just utopian fairy tales? No, they are not! They correspond to the deepest longings of the human heart and point to the truth waiting to be revealed beyond all lies and deceptions.

The marvelous vision of the peaceable Kingdom, in which all violence has been overcome and all men, women, and children live in loving unity with nature, calls for its realization in our day-to-day lives. Instead of being an escapist dream, it challenges us to anticipate what it promises. Every time we forgive our neighbor, every time we make a child smile, every time we show compassion to a suffering person, every time we arrange a bouquet of flowers, offer care to tame or wild animals, prevent pollution, create beauty in our homes and gardens, and work for peace and justice among peoples and nations we are making the vision come true.

We must remind one another constantly of the vision. Whenever it comes alive in us we will find new energy to live it out, right where we are. Instead of making us escape real life, this beautiful vision gets us involved.<sup>viii</sup>

I know. That vision is so contrary to the human experience. Understandably, most people really don't expect peace and, therefore, do little to work for it. However, as Christians we should be the most hopeful and expectant people in the world. **"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."**<sup>ix</sup> Because of Easter, our Advent waiting can be done with hope. Because of Easter we know that **"hope does not disappoint us."**<sup>x</sup> So let us attend as many peace talks as there are and shake as many hands as

there are to be shaken, no matter how foolhardy it may look to the world, because we know something the world does not know: **“in the Lord, our labor is not in vain.”**<sup>xi</sup>

The posture of Advent waiting is not one of sitting on our hands while waiting around, but one of action – working for justice and righteousness, the fruit of which will be peace, shalom, salaam.

#### Endnotes

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- i. Isaiah 2:1
  - ii. John 12:32
  - iii. See 1 Corinthians 1:24
  - iv. Quoted by Ann Svennungsen, “Peacemakers in the Household of God”, in the radio program, 30 Good Minutes, Program #4804, October 24, 2004
  - v. Matthew 6:33
  - vi. *Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 1, 2007, article by Victor L. Simpson from the Associated Press
  - vii. See Book of Confessions, 9.53 - 9.56, *The Confession of 1967*
  - viii. *Bread for the Journey*, (HarperSanFrancisco, 1997) Readings for December 12 and 13.
  - ix. 1 Peter 1:3
  - x. Romans 5:5
  - xi. 1 Corinthians 15:58