

Yes, today marks the first Sunday of a new church year and the first Sunday in Advent. Today, we begin a time of waiting. Waiting is something all of us experience. In many ways, one could say our whole life is spent in waiting. We wait for all kinds of things. Information puts us on hold as we wait on the phone while our ears are pumped with thin, irritating music. Our order hasn't come yet and we are hungry. The elevator must be stuck. One's spouse is late. Will the rain or snow ever stop? When will the paint finally dry? Will anyone ever understand? Will I ever change? Our kids ask, "How long is it until we get there?" or "How many days until Christmas?" Life is simply a series of hopes and waiting and only partial fulfillments. Our human condition seems to be one of constantly unsatisfied desire. As we enter this season of the church year, Advent invites us to understand with a new patience that very difficult state of being. Advent means coming, and so we wait for God's coming. We wait as we prepare for God's greatest event. And, as we begin this time of Advent waiting, the first words we are given today are words from the prophet Isaiah.

The world in which Isaiah lived was a chaotic, unjust, broken, hurting, warring world. Israel was a storm-tossed nation that was threatened by the powerful Assyrians to the north and east and menaced by the Egyptians to

the south and west. The king and his advisors were occupied with what they needed to do to protect themselves. Events were out of control and fear was running rampant. And, into that turmoil and storm-tossed world a voice stood out, the voice of Isaiah. The people were waiting for God to reveal a word concerning their situation. And, God **did** speak and **does** speak through the prophet. The prophet Isaiah speaks of seeing a reality that is deeper than the reality the people were living. He proclaims God's vision for the world, holding up a vision of God's future, the One to whom the future belongs. He proclaims:

*"Look! Focus your eyes upon the mountain of the house of the Lord...there on the shore....For it shall rise up and be established as the highest of the mountains...And people of **all** races will come and say: "Let us make our way together to the mountain of the Lord, that he may teach us his ways, and that we may walk in his paths." He shall judge between the nations and shall decide for many peoples; And 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."*

Into that chaotic, warring world, Isaiah speaks a word of hope and a word of peace. Biblical scholar, Walter Brueggemann, has compared these words from Isaiah to the "I have a dream" speech from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Isaiah provided words of hope and peace as the people waited for that future God promised, a future that was very different from what was visible to them just then.

We are living in a chaotic, unjust, broken, hurting, warring world.

World leaders and their advisors are occupied with what they need to do to protect themselves. Events sometimes seem out of control and fear is running rampant in many places within our culture. And, into this turmoil and storm-tossed world a voice stands out, the voice of Isaiah. On this first Sunday of Advent as we begin a new church year and that Advent time of waiting, Isaiah speaks and promises a time when God's ways will fully shape how all of us live, every single person – “all the nations....all peoples” will be streaming toward the bright light of peace, and there is enough, for all. It may not look like that right now, but Advent is about taking the long view of things and seeing where the arc of justice bends as we look to the future. And, as we wait for that time of God’s fulfillment, God invites us not just to imagine and dream but to make God’s dream a priority in our everyday lives, living **into** that dream. As people of faith, we live holding up a vision of God’s future for this world. That is the work of the church.

Many of you probably remember Ruby Bridges, the little six-year old who was one of the first African-American children to integrate the New Orleans public schools. If you remember her story, every morning the federal marshals would escort Ruby through the lines of angry parents

hurling insults, racial slurs, and violent words. And then the same thing happened every afternoon when school let out. This went on for weeks and then months, until finally virtually every white family had withdrawn their children from the school. So, Ruby went to school all by herself for the better part of the term. The situation caught the attention of Harvard child psychologist, Robert Coles. Coles decided to go to New Orleans where he interviewed and spent time with Ruby and her parents. He interviewed her teacher, asked how she thought Ruby could tolerate such continual adversity and abuse. Just listen to the verbatim from that teacher. She said:

I was standing in the classroom looking out the window. I saw Ruby coming down the street with the federal marshals on both sides of her. The crowd was there shouting as usual. A woman spat at Ruby, but missed. Ruby smiled at her. A man shook his fist at her. Ruby smiled. And then she walked up the steps, and she stopped and turned around and smiled one more time. You know what she told one of those marshals? She told him she prays for those people, the ones in that mob. She prays for them every night before going to sleep.

The interview prompted Coles to speak directly to Ruby about her prayers. "Yes," Ruby said, "I do pray for them." Coles asked, "Why? Why would you pray for people who are so mean to you and say such bad things about you?" Ruby answered, "Because Mama said I should." Coles pressed on with questions. Ruby said, "I go to church. I go to church every

Sunday, and we're told to pray for people, even bad people. Mama says it's true. My minister says the same thing. 'We don't have to worry,' he says. He came to our house, and he say, 'God is watching over us.' He say, 'If I forgive the people and smile at them and pray for them, God will keep a good eye on everything and he'll protect us.'" Coles asked if she thought the minister was on the right track. "Oh, yes," Ruby said. And then in a way of explanation, "I'm sure God knows what is happening. God's got a lot to worry about, but there's bad trouble here. God can't help but notice. He may not do anything right now, but there will come a day, like they say in church, there will come a day. You can count on it. That's what they say in church."

Yes, there will come a day. You can count on it. That's what the church says. Ruby Bridges lived that as a child. And, if Isaiah and Dr. King and Ruby Bridges could dream of peace and lift up that vision for us, we too can dream the dream of peace and re-arrange our individual lives and the life of our communities, large and small, to be peace-making communities of generosity, justice and joy. We can work to develop communities where people listen to each other, communities of self-examination, of acceptance, of change – even if that change is not easy or fast. Now, I know we can't do this on our own, but God **does** make it

possible and God's **grace** enables us to accomplish so much more than we can even imagine.

As we continue to wait for God's coming in fullness to this broken world, the promise of Advent is that what is coming is an unimaginable invasion, an invasion of holiness, an invasion of God in this world. So, stay awake, be alert and be ready. God is on the way. That is what Advent is all about.