

On this first Sunday in Advent as we usher in a new church year, we begin a time of waiting. Waiting is something all of us experience. In many ways, one could say our whole life is spent waiting. We wait for all kinds of things. A recorded voice 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 driver in front of you is going so slowly and you cannot pass because of oncoming traffic. Certain circumstances cause us to ask questions like: 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, times of waiting, and only partial fulfillments. Quite honestly, the human condition **does** seem to be a state of living with constantly unsatisfied desire as we wait for something that is **truly** fulfilling. Advent invites us to understand with new patience **that** condition, **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 waiting, the first words given to us are from the prophet Isaiah.

Isaiah's world 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. The people were waiting for God to reveal a word concerning their situation. And, into that turmoil and storm-tossed world a voice stood out, the voice of Isaiah. Through the prophet Isaiah, God **did** speak, **does** speak, and **continues** to speak. 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...For it shall rise up and be established as the highest of the mountains...And people of **all** races will come and say: ‘Come, let’s climb God’s Mountain, go to the House of the God of Jacob. He’ll show us the way he works so we can live the way we’re made.’ God’s message comes from Jerusalem. God will settle things fairly between nations. God will make things right between many peoples so that they will turn their swords into shovels, their spears into hoes. No more will nation fight nations; they won’t play war anymore. Come, let’s live in the light of God.” (The Message)*

Into that chaotic, warring world, Isaiah speaks a word of hope and a word of peace. Centered on God's dream for the world, Isaiah's vision involves more than a geographical location: it is a place of light and truth,

of justice and judgment, where God's supreme power and authority are honored and enacted. It is a vision place, a place of no more war. Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, has compared these words from Isaiah to the "I have a dream" speech from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Like Dr. King, 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 at the present moment.

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**. We have again experienced more gun violence and multiple mass shootings. 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. As we begin a new church year by intentionally waiting, Isaiah speaks and promises **us** a time when God's ways **will** fully shape how **all** of us live. Every single person – "all 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 by living **into** that dream. As people of faith, we live holding up a vision of God's future for this world. God's vision for the world is not yet fulfilled but, if we believe that God has brought justice to the world, we live that justice and share in the work of making the world more just. We **have** been instructed in the Lord's ways; now is the time to walk in them and take the Word of the Lord forth into the world – caring for the poor, feeding the hungry, working for peace, unity, and enduring justice for **all** people, especially those most in need of hope. That is the work of the church.

Many of you probably remember the story of 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. Then the same thing happened every afternoon when school got 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 semester. 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 welcome and hospitality, of change – even if that change is not easy or fast.

Advent is about dreams and visions, the dream of God for this world, and how God's dream comes true in flesh and blood, in the person of Jesus, **and** in and through the Church. As we continue to wait for God's coming in fullness, 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, and be alert, and wait. God is on the way. And, as we wait, we do so by **living** God's dream for this world in this present moment. Come! It is time to live in the light of God!