Wait, Watch, and Be Present

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Isaiah 2: 1-5 Russell Mitchell-Walker

Matthew 24: 36-44

Happy New Year! It may seem early for this greeting, but today we enter a new year in the church season. Today begins the season of Advent, and it is the beginning of a new church year. As such we also begin a new cycle of the Lectionary and we have decided to return to the what is called the New Revised Common Lectionary that most churches use for the scripture readings each week. The past four years we have used the Narrative Lectionary which is designed to take us through the bible stories. Advent is about the coming of Jesus, being prepared and watching for his coming – not only preparing for the celebrating of his birth, but also looking toward and being prepared for his coming again. So, as we begin Advent, the lectionary readings will take us through some of the readings that talk about Jesus’ return and his coming as an adult to John the Baptist as well as Old Testament messages of a vision of the kingdom of peace and justice. We wait expectantly in this time as we prepare, as we watch, for the ways Jesus comes into our lives.

The first reading from Isaiah 2 presents a vision of a world to come. In the first chapter, it identifies the world as a pretty dismal place with much suffering and injustice. The second chapter offers a vision of hope and peace. One can make parallels with some of the situations named in the first chapter.

Your country lies desolate,

your cities are burned with fire…Australia and California

And daughter Zion is left like a booth in a vineyard,

like a shelter in a cucumber field, like a besieged city. …Hong Kong

Everyone loves a bribe

and runs after gifts. ….the presidential impeachment hearings

They do not defend the orphan,

and the widow’s cause does not come before them. …immigrant children in detention.

The prophet Isaiah in chapter 2 presents a future that we are called to prepare for and work toward. It is a vision of the future which should shape the days in which we are living. It provides a vision of hope in the midst of despair and a community challenged by systems and structures that are not supporting those in need. The image of beating swords into ploughshares – a well known one – is challenging to our present culture that seems so caught in violence. It is an image present in a statue outside of the UN buildings in New York City but it does not recognize that the verse before it refers to people turning to God and following God’s way. People are turning toward God and following in God’s ways when they are working to live out this vision.

We see people following God’s ways in the students protesting for democracy in Hong Kong, resulting in some significant changes in leadership in recent council elections.

We see people following God’s ways through children protesting for leaders to address the climate crisis.

We see people following God’s ways in the movement of youth protesting gun violence and working for tougher gun laws in the US.

We see people following God’s ways in the steps toward reconciliation in the apologies offered this week by a coach to a Hockey player who experienced his racist slurs and by the Nova Scotian government to African Canadians who have experienced racist practices of street checks at significantly higher numbers by police.

There is hope toward living out Isaiah’s vision of God’s desire for us.

This hope and action are all part of being prepared, waiting and watching for the coming of Christ. In Matthew, Jesus is talking about his coming again in the future, and not knowing when that would happen, that we need to be ready. The passage identifies when he comes some will be taken and some will be left. This has been misused and misunderstood with regard to what some call the rapture – that when Jesus comes he will take the righteous up into heaven. However, in the context of this passage, Matthew has just made a reference to the days of Noah where those who were living lives of injustice and unfaithfulness were swept away by the flood. In the same way, then, when the Son of Humanity comes the reference is that it will be the unrighteous who will be taken and the followers left. Jesus always spoke about the kingdom on earth arriving with his coming. Likewise, when he comes again it is to establish a peaceable kingdom on earth. In the meantime, we are to watch, wait and be prepared for we do not know when the time is to come. Being prepared means working toward creating the kingdom, the community of Shalom that Isaiah and Jesus identify.

We are people of the now and the not yet. We are to live in the now, in this world, living out God’s ways of peace and justice, creating the shalom community while we wait for the not yet, the time when God will usher in the shalom community, however that might happen. Living in the now, being present to the moment is an important part of this being prepared. What does it mean to live in the now? On Friday, 12 of us went to see A Beautiful day in the Neighborhood about Mr. Rogers. It was a wonderful, very well-done movie and one of the things that struck me was that Fred Rogers was someone who very much lived in the moment. What was most important to him was what was happening or what he was doing in that moment. This way of life also made a significant impact on those he interacted with and often led to peace and right relationship. He made an important connection with a young boy who was having some behavioural issues, and his relationship with a writer who was assigned to interview him, a focal point of the movie, transformed the writers life toward healing and being a better person. It was a profound example of the importance of living in the moment, but I wonder how many will actually make that connection in watching the movie. This is part of what is involved in waking up, watching and being prepared.

When we can appreciate the moment, we can take note of God’s presence with us and in our lives. This week, during my coffee shop office hours, Sam and Delia came for a visit and while there, a newcomer to Eastside and Canada, Hamed came to join us. Hamed came to the Community Dinner last week as a new person in the area having just moved here from Dubai a few months ago. He joined us for church and pot-luck on Sunday and then came for a visit at the coffee shop. The four of us had a wonderful conversation which included issues and questions about church, religion, climate change, capitalism and consumer culture, and racism. There was much question, learning and insights. At one point, Delia celebrated how great the conversation was, how much she enjoyed it and named it as church and a holy moment. When we can be present to one another and what right before us, we can experience the holy, God with us, and in us. Whether we believe Jesus is coming again in some apocalyptic event or not, Advent is about being open to experience the myriad of ways that the Christ comes to us, God breaking into our lives in unexpected ways.

To be prepared, to watch, to wait, is not only about preparing for Christmas, it is to know that we do not know when we will experience the Light of Christ shining among us, and being present with us. In this season we celebrate the coming of Jesus who is not just back then in this place or that place, but is in every place, in every time.