

Isaiah 2:1-5

1The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

2In days to come

the mountain of the Lord's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.

3Many peoples shall come and say,
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths."

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

4He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
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.

5O house of Jacob,
come, let us walk
in the light of the Lord!

Matthew 24:36-44

[Jesus said to the disciples,] 36"About that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 37For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 38For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, 39and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. 40Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. 41Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. 42Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. 43But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. 44Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour."

Matthew 24:36-44, Isaiah 2:1-5

Happy New Year! Not the conventional January 1st, but the first day of the new church year, a time to renew, remember, reconnect. A time to once again for the first time prepare for the birth of our savior, knowing that his historical birth took place only once, that he has promised to return to this earth, but that he is born again each year in our hearts as we celebrate a new beginning. A babe born in a manger. A cold and lonely birth. A birth that brought us closer to our creator God.

Who would imagine a king to be born in a stable? Who would imagine the savior of the world to have such a humble beginning?

All the earth was waiting for this Messiah, this King whom the Israeli nation though would rescue them from the oppressive Roman government. Yet no one was ready for his arrival into the world. You may say that his mother was more than ready, but when you consider how we prepare for a child to be born, getting the room ready with a crib, blankets, toys, bottles, it doesn't seem as though Mary was prepared for this birth at all... she didn't even have a midwife lined up to help her with the birth. And Joseph, I don't think he had a clue. There were no proper accommodations reserved. (Of course there were no such thing as making hotel reservations at that time). He hadn't been in touch with his family, if any of his distant relatives still lived in his ancestral home.

In 2001 John Grisham took a break from writing mysteries to write a short novel "Skipping Christmas", it was subsequently made into a movie, "Christmas with the Kranks". It told the story of how an empty nest couple decided that since their daughter wasn't planning to come home for Christmas they would skip their normal Christmas celebration that included a fully decorated house (inside and out), and a huge Christmas Eve party that was filled with food and the entire neighborhood and all their friends. Instead of their normal all out Christmas celebrations they were doing nothing. Nothing. And taking a cruise.

Everything was ready for their departure just a couple of days before Christmas when they received a phone call from their daughter, whom they had neglected to tell their plans. She had changed her mind. She would be home on Christmas Eve and was looking forward to their annual celebrations. Instead of telling her they had cancelled Christmas and were going on a cruise they cancelled their cruise and began to hurriedly prepare for their normal celebration. That gave them a day to get the tree, trim it, lavishly decorate the inside and outside of the house. Buy enough food to feed an army, get in touch with all the people who normally came to their party and have them agree to come, and have it all look as though they hadn't rushed to put it together. Everyone joined together to help the couple pull it off without a hitch. When their daughter arrived, it looked as though they had planned to celebrate their traditional Christmas all along.

The moral of the story is that Christmas is a time of sharing. It isn't something to be experienced alone. Even Mary and Joseph were not alone on the night Jesus was born. They were given a place to shelter, they had the animals for warmth, the shepherds came to pay them a visit. Although they weren't prepared for the birth of a child, it happened anyway, and God provided.

Our gospel lesson from Matthew isn't what we'd expect for a reading to begin the Advent season. It talks about the second coming, the time when Jesus returns to rule the earth. It is a glance at the future. Have you ever read a book that uses foreshadow to explain the

importance of what is currently taking place? That is what is happening here. We are hearing why it is so important for us to prepare for the birth of God's son, not only as a baby but as a powerful King who will return to claim us as his own.

Putting aside all the beauty of the Christmas decorations, how do we prepare for the birth of the Christ child? How do we prepare for the reign of the King of Kings? We begin by turning to the words of Isaiah which beckon us to walk in the light of the Lord. We pay attention to what God has instructed in the 10 commandments and in the command of Jesus to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself.

We wait, but not by idly standing by. It is an active time of waiting. A time of preparing not only our hearts, but of preparing a place that is ready to welcome Jesus as King. We prepare for a time when the swords shall be beaten into plows and pruning hooks. A time when tools of destruction are forged into tools which are used to foster growth.

We can look at this metaphorically as we examine our own lives. What is it from your past that has given you the strength to face what ever it is that you are facing today? What is it you are learning today that will help you to face your future? I know there are things that happened in my past, and I imagine you have had such incidents, that at the time it happened, seemed to be the worst thing that could possibly take place. But I, and you, made it through. It helped to sculpt who we have become. And the insight gleaned from those incidents have helped us to make it through some of the most difficult times later in life. Like swords being beaten into plows, our experiences have been helpful to foster growth. Would it have been easier to experience those difficulties if we had been given a foreshadow of our lives to come? I don't think so.

But in today's reading of the gospel of Matthew the foreshadowing of the Advent season with the time of Christ's return to reign in glory makes all the preparations worth the effort. We know there is something far greater coming, not only does what we experience here and now prepare us for the time to come, we know that all we are going through will one day be worth everything we have done to prepare for Christ's coming into our lives.

All glory be to God.