

The Way of the Lord: Swords into Plowshares

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. I know that we have people here who have spent quite a bit of your lives in churches that observed Advent, and others who didn't. So I wanted to begin this morning by talking a little bit about what Advent is and why we observe it here at First Congregational. And I need to begin by talking a little bit about the Christian calendar. The Christian Church has historically divided the year into seasons – Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, and Ordinary Time. There's actually a season called ordinary time and it means exactly what it sounds like – it's ordinary – there's no special event in our faith story that we are commemorating. Now the church calendar doesn't follow the regular calendar as Advent is actually the beginning of the church year. So happy new year y'all!

And there's a reason why the Church year begins with Advent. Advent is a Latin Word that means coming, specifically the coming of Christ. And we focus on three different aspects of Christ coming. **First, Christ coming in final victory** – so don't think so much about left behind stuff or end times pop culture things as that actually has nothing to do with Advent so much as what we say in the Lord's prayer: "Your kingdom come, your will be done on Earth [[pause] as it is in heaven." In other words, Advent proclaims the hope that one day peace, love, and justice will prevail upon the Earth and all violence, oppression, and injustice shall end. In Advent, we name that every oppressive power in this world has already been defeated and that Christ's love has already overcome even if that reality isn't fully manifest.

Secondly, in Advent, we prepare to once again celebrate Jesus' birth and will hear the stories of John the Baptist and Mary and Joseph. And finally, Advent is a time of personal preparation, a time to ponder and reflect what it means to once again invite Jesus into our lives, communities, and world.

You may have noticed that prepare is a word I've used a lot in describing Advent. In fact, as we will see next week, the message of John the Baptist was "Prepare the Way of the Lord," and if you wanted a phrase to sum up what Advent is all about, that would be it – "Prepare the Way of the Lord." But for this sermon series, we are asking ourselves if this is a time to prepare the way of the Lord, well, what exactly is the way of the Lord? That's the overarching question for this sermon series. And Advent always begins by starting with the big picture view – the way of the Lord in the coming reign of Christ and working its way back to the present.

During Advent, I always preach from the lectionary which is a selection of Bible passages – an Old Testament, a Psalm, a gospel reading, and another New Testament reading. And these readings repeat on a three year cycle. The idea is that Christians all over the world are reading the same Scriptures and that if you come to church pretty regularly for three years, you will have heard a lot of our Biblical story read. The gospel lectionary for the first Sunday of Advent always begins with some of the most obscure and strange passages in the gospels where Jesus talks about the sun darkened and all these gloom and dark images. For a season that is meant to be one of hope, we sure do seem to start off pretty dark.

The reason for that is precisely because the hope of Advent is a real hope – one that takes seriously the immense amount of evil, violence, and suffering in the world – and we look at all that evil and oppression and defiantly declare hope anyway. Advent is my favorite church season precisely because it is unabashedly realistic. There is nothing naïve about Advent, and in that sense, Advent is so different than the popular way we prepare for Christmas, right?

I mean we are told over and over again that It's the most wonderful time of the year. We are told that our chestnuts should be roasting by the fire and our stockings hung with care. We are told it's the time when we all should be nothing but joyful. And if you really want to make it super joyful, we are told we should go out and spend a lot of money shopping.

Now don't get me wrong – it's not that any of these messages are wrong in and of themselves. For many families, this is a wonderful and joyful time of the year and there is something sweet about giving the people we love gifts. The problem, though, is that these messages we hear lack nuance. Because for many, this is not a wonderful time, but an all too painful reminder of loss. And sometimes we can lose sight of all that is broken in our world, numbed to the pain all around us by nostalgic images of Santa pics and Christmas lights.

And yet, we know that all is not well.

Every week, we hear stories about all that is broken in our world – the war in Ukraine, mass shootings here in the U.S., political divisions that seemingly cannot be bridged, and a rise in hate crimes targeting marginalized peoples and groups. Or for some of us, the reminder that things are not as they should be are much more personal. The loss of a loved one. An unwelcome diagnosis. A child caught in addiction. Overwhelming feelings of depression.

The way our culture prepares for Christmas simply can't take into account these things – because to look at the world as it actually is would mess with our most wonderful time of the year theme.

But Advent invites us to prepare for Christmas in a different, a more real way. Advent begins not with a vision of joy, but rather with a prediction of destruction. Jesus warned, "the sun will be darkened and the moon not give its light." Far too often, these passages are interpreted as if Jesus is talking about some distant day in the future when Jesus returns for the second time, but Jesus didn't have to wait thousands of years for his words to ring true. Jesus and his people lived a fragile existence right then. At any moment the Roman Empire could descend upon them with the full weight of their power and crush them. And that they did a few years after Jesus' life in the year 70AD when they sacked Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. This was the second time the temple was destroyed as the Babylonians did so 600 years earlier.

And yet, even while predicting Jerusalem's destruction, Jesus did not do so without also offering hope. He says, "Then the Son of Man will appear in the heavens," and crush the powers of death, war, and oppression. This is vastly different from the wonderful time of year message we hear all around us. This is a message that takes seriously the way things are. All is not well. The world is a mess. Far too many of God's children suffer under the weight of oppression and

injustice. Advent begins by acknowledging the reality of suffering all around us. The hope of Advent is not one that turns a blind eye to that suffering throughout the world but rather it offers a hope that is stronger than the suffering. In other words, Advent offers a real hope – not a sanitized one.

Jesus was not the first person to speak both of the current state of things and a hope even in the midst of suffering. In the reading from Isaiah we have this beautiful vision of world peace where nation shall not lift up sword against nation, where weapons of war will be turned into farming tools, tools that are used to grow food and thus give life. Isaiah had this vision not in a time of peace, but in a time when his people were about to be devastated by war. Isaiah, like many of our prophets, was written at a time when the Babylonian empire either was about to destroy Jerusalem or had just destroyed Jerusalem. This was not a happy, hopeful time for the Hebrew people. It was not a time when you would expect someone to proclaim such a beautiful vision of peace.

But here we have Isaiah, who is staring war in the face, who knows full well that the destruction of his city is imminent, and yet dares to proclaim a vision of hope even in the midst of such destruction. The destruction is real and painful, but the hope is more real and more lasting:

God 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.

Isaiah's ancient vision is one that Pati Poblete of the Bay area of California has made a reality. Her 23 year old son Robby Poblete was murdered during an attempted robbery in 2014. Since then, Pati has organized gun buyback programs to try to take weapons off the street and then, in a partnership with local artists, has transformed the weapons of death into works of art, the centerpieces at her Art of Peace exhibits that honor reconciliation and healing.

You see, Art of Peace brings hope not by denying the very real trauma of gun violence but by proclaiming a different reality – that gun violence, that loss, that grief don't have the last word. Hope does. Peace does. One of the Art of Peace artists said, "art is about taking the unimaginable and making it unforgettable." That's what Art of Peace has done by transforming weapons of death into artistic expressions that bring healing, that bring a whole community together. Making the unimaginable, unforgettable.

I think that's also what Advent is all about. It was unimaginable for the people of Jesus' day to see a hope that could transcend the destruction the Roman Empire was about to bring. It was unimaginable for the people of Isaiah day's to see a vision of peace with the Babylonian army

camped outside their city gates. And yet, Jesus and Isaiah both stared that reality in the face and dared to proclaim that the unimaginable would indeed come to pass.

That's the hope of Advent. During this season of waiting, we are invited not to naively say all is well, but to honestly look at how things really are. To look at all of the world's pain, all of the world's violence, all of the world's injustice and to work to resist it – resist the evil and the injustice and the oppression that is so pervasive and in the midst of that resistance dare to proclaim, one day we will all beat our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks and nation shall not lift up sword against nation and neither shall they learn war any more. And the unimaginable shall become unforgettable.