

<Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122:1-9; Matthew 24:36-44>

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Immanuel, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

The season of Advent - taken from the Latin *adventus*, meaning "coming" - has now arrived. In this season marked by preparation and anticipation - we await the coming anew of Christ, the Messiah, Immanuel God-With-Us - there is perhaps one question on our minds above all other questions, one burning thought which demands our attention and needs our addressing: 'what is on your wish list?'

I believe I've mentioned to you before that my dad has a strict rule of "no talking about what you want for Christmas until after Thanksgiving." While he said it was to keep us focused on the proper holiday at the proper time, I suspect he really just didn't want to be pestered with hints and the rambling desires of a young child. Now that I'm a parent I understand such an interest. I can remember that, almost as soon as Halloween was complete, my mind would go toward the wish list that I would present to any and all possible sources of appeasement, including parents and the sure-fire go-to, grandparents. Santa was in that conversation, too.

Now, I find myself desiring to echo my dad's rule about timing, especially as the promotion and encouragement to embrace the trappings of Christmas have snuck into late September. I noted as well, this year, that it was early October when a certain toy guide from a retailer arrived in the mail addressed to our daughter, and I remain grateful that I intercepted the mail before our daughter saw it.

The commercialism is rampant, and the drive for kids, especially to create extensive wish lists comes at a frenetic pace. There is nothing new about this; for decades the approach to this season has been marked in such a way by advertisements and commercials, by guides and catalogs, even by movies, tv shows, and songs. For months, the question becomes, "what's on your wish list?"

And we could play along, certainly, even as grown-ups, though the caliber of my wish has changed. Recently, I've seen floating around on social media posts such as, "If anyone asks, I wear a size 'window seat on a flight to Scotland.'" There's some truth in that. As I grow, and in conversations with some of you this has been echoed, I find that my wish list is less tangible and more connectational - I yearn for a happy and peaceful day of family and celebration, or for there to be less division amongst neighbors.

All of this, however, centers the wishing, the yearning, the hoped-for longing of this season primarily from our human perspective. This year, though, as I approached and planned for the Advent season, I found myself wondering, "what would be on God's wish list?"

It's an idle question, perhaps, but one that I could argue has merit for our consideration as we enter this season of preparing and awaiting, this season of Advent.

We know Isaiah to be many things to the people of God: a guide, a counselor, one who warns and corrects...as a prophet, Isaiah even becomes one who generically says, 'I told you so,' though not in so many words, but rather expresses what led the people into exile, which he told them about earlier. But throughout all these roles, and all these proclamations, Isaiah is a representation of hope - Hope that is always found in following and seeking after God, and in holding fast to God's vision for the people, for the world.

So just what is it that comprises God's wish list, as expressed to the people? What is it that encompasses the vision of God for the people and the world, as the desire to see realized? Are you ready, because it's a doozy of an ask:

That the people would know God, come together to worship, and walk in the Light of the Lord.

On the surface it sounds simple and straightforward enough; it is a goal, an invitation and a calling which we proclaim almost weekly. But in practice, in the nitty gritty of realization, it can become much more challenging. For instance, in an effort to achieve this goal, this vision, this item on the Divine Wish List, Isaiah goes on to proclaim one of the primary ways in which it can be achieved: the people shall beat their swords into plowshares, their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.

To quote a colleague down in Ft. Worth, Texas, "I am positive that there are folks out there who hear Isaiah 2:4 and think: how lovely. And how naive."

If it were that simple, we would have done it years ago. Generations ago. And certainly, the need for such a reality is ever-present before us, and ever-lamentable. I can't speak for any of you, but it feels to me that every day of my life since I started to become aware of foreign relations has been one in which war and the threat of war has loomed ever closer. The idea of taking means of protection, which also happens to be means of aggression, and turning them into farming equipment comes across as naive and preposterous.

It felt just the same to the people of Israel, hearing Isaiah make this proclamation in the 8th century B.C. Their golden age of prosperity has become little more than a memory, and the much larger, much more powerful nation of Assyria is making its way across the landscape, conquering and overwhelming every other nation that it comes across, and now Israel is next up. Swords into plowshares, at a time like this? To not learn war, when war is at our doorstep? God, your wish list is too unrealistic.

We'll return to this thought in a moment, but first I want to jump to Matthew's gospel. Here, following multiple treatises on when the signs of the end of times shall come, and before Jesus' discussions on the attitudes and approaches of daily discipleship, we find Jesus stating unequivocally that the day and the hour of God's return, and the realization of the Kingdom of God, are unknown to all except God. Remember this when next we hear of predictions of the end of the world at a particular day and time: no one knows but God. In the midst of it all, Jesus uses the example of Noah and the people of the world, who continued to simply go about life as if nothing was going to change, as if nothing could change.

But Noah knew better; Noah had heard from God, and knew what to do to faithfully follow, and it was not the same as going about life like nothing could change. Noah himself became the change. Rather than waiting for a particular sign or change in the weather, Noah took the instruction he had been given and got to work. He was called crazy and ridiculed. It seemed to the people as if there was no need, no capacity for such change; certainly there were no signs or portents for them to follow. But Noah, even uncertain of the day and hour, followed faithfully the strange and perhaps non-sensical instructions.

Isaiah, too, is giving the people strange and non-sensical instructions, and we, at least, can see where some of the benefit of these instructions will lead: closer to God, and the realization and establishing of God's Kingdom here on earth.

And we know the need is great. Who of us has not looked at the state of our world over the last years, the last decades, even the last generations, and not recognized the need for realizing God's Kingdom, and our desire to see it so. If only the possibility of such did not seem so crazy, so ridiculous, so...wishful.

The season of Advent is now upon us. We await the coming of our Lord, anew and once more, into our lives and into our world. We await and we prepare, not merely by decking halls and hanging tinsel and putting up trees and wreaths and lights - though, thank you, again, to all our volunteers who undertook this last week! - but we prepare by following God, even when it seems crazy and ridiculous. To do so is to live into God's wish list. We follow God to draw close to God, to take steps, even one small step, closer toward a world without war rather than accepting that there is no other way.

We do this so that we might be part of fulfilling God's wish list to see all creation live as it was created and intended to live. We do this to see God's Kingdom realized, not in some distant time or place but in the here and now of our living. We do this to draw closer to God in worship and to proclaim the presence of God in the midst of the greatest need in the world. And we do this because it is more than a wish, it is our calling. May we follow faithfully, indeed, in this season and in all seasons. Amen.

*(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)*