

SCRIPTURES FOR SUNDAY 11.27.2016

THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 2:1-5

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

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

² In 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.

³ Many 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.

⁴ He 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.

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

The exact relationship between the Book of Isaiah and any such historical Isaiah is complicated. The traditional view is that all 66 chapters of the book of Isaiah were written by one man, Isaiah--possibly in two periods between 740 BCE and c. 686 BCE. One widespread view sees parts of the first half of the book (chapters 1-39) as originating with the historical prophet, interspersed with prose commentaries written in the time of King Josiah a hundred years later; with the remainder of the book dating from immediately before and immediately after the end of the exile in Babylon, almost two centuries after the time of the original prophet. Exact dating is beyond our scientific capacity, yet that changes not the word in Isaiah. He lived during the ascension of the Assyrian Empire, against which the king of Judah (Hezekiah) [2 Kings 18:7] rebelled by entering into an alliance with the king of Egypt [Isaiah 30:2-4] and the subsequent destruction of Judah, fall of kings and genocidal deportation of the Judean elites and nobility to Babylon.

"This prophetic text of the promise of God's eschatological fulfillment of God's kingdom is also recorded in Micah 4:1-3 and in Isaiah 25:6-10. This repetition seems to indicate that it was a common, well established vision of God's preferred future for the world. It's a word of hope, a radical confidence spoken in historical circumstances that were far from hopeful. It's a declaration, that no matters the powers of our present age – Assyrians, Babylonians, Romans,....others....they do not determine the future. God does.

In Isaiah's time the difficult present circumstances were probably associated with the Syro-Ephraimitic war, when the northern kingdom of Israel and the Aramean kingdom of Damascus tried to force Judah into an unwise alliance in opposition to the Assyrian Empire. When these foes finally laid siege to Jerusalem, King Ahaz turned to the prophet Isaiah for advice and assurance.

Some textual observations include:

1. Regardless of where power seems to lie in the present, the day is coming when God's reign will be established for all humankind to see. Mount Zion will be central and elevated over all other claims to prominence and power.
2. The temple on Mount Zion in Jerusalem was more than ethnic or national geography, it was the locus of God's presence in the midst of God's people. It's not a political claim of Jerusalem, but rather a spiritual claim of God's presence as the true center to which all nations will stream.
3. Part of the hoped-for future is that all humanity will also recognize the needs for God's direction in their lives. It's not limited to one race, ethnicity or gender.
4. The text talks of ways, paths, law, word – all of which express the direction that comes from God which counter the alternatives that tempt our allegiance in our world, to self-centered, idolatrous life.
5. The text talks of judgment, a result of this new alternative world. It's judgement of the nations, and also the means to and of war."

Matthew 24:36-44

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

³⁶ “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³⁷ For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, ³⁹ and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. ⁴² Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³ But 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. ⁴⁴ Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

Questions for the Practice of Examen & Contemplation

The word Advent means appearance, pointing towards the parousia of the one we first knew as the manger baby. It's rooted in the notion of time: waiting, expecting, remembering. How are you anxious or apathetic as you look towards the time constraints of the Christmas season? How do you allow God's future to orient the way you use your time, in Advent and beyond? How don't you?

How do you experience and celebrate the season of Advent? As the days leading to Christmas? Re-reading, remembering the story of the birth of Jesus? ; Yearning for, looking to the return of Jesus?; or as a busy season, a time to endure and get through before the big day?

How do you experience time in general in and through your faith? Do you look to God to get your through challenging times? Does God orient your time, to what you look? How do the promises of scripture shape the way you use your time? How don't they? How would you like them to?

Our portion of Matthew comes from what biblical scholars call Matthew's fifth discourse, which deal with eschatological matters and judgment (Matthew 24:1-25:46).

Verse 36 claims that none know the day, implying a view of the limit of the Son's knowledge (which is entirely compatibly with passages like Philippians 2:5-11. So this notion of unknowability shouldn't surprise us, as much as instill within us a certain humanity in our efforts to discern God's will. Even Jesus didn't know, so why should we?

The discourse contains three examples of discerning God's will: Verses 37-39 – talks of the last days of Noah. This story in Genesis is interpreted in various ways in the whole of the Bible, including Hebrews 11:7, 1 Peters 3:20, 2 Peter 2:5 and Ezekiel 14:14, 20 and Isaiah 54:20. Our passage focuses not on the the righteousness of Noah, but on the failure of those who did not prepare, who were not 'watchful.' People seemed to presume that there would be a future, assuming that there was more time.

Verse 40 tells the story of two men. Verse 41 tells the story of two women. These stories of judgement include gender-appropriate work, indicating that the judgment of God invades domestic space and fields alike: the whole world.

The day will come like a thief, unexpectedly and impossibly to anticipate. So while we continue with the work of daily life we must be watchful, aware, looking through the ordinary days to discern the coming of that extraordinary day.

Matthew 24 is Jesus talking of the days to come, the last days. We tend to have two approaches to apocalyptic notions. Some Christians think that the whole emphasis on Christ's second-coming (*parousia* in theology-ese) is much ado about nothing, an occasional topic to endure or avoid. Such thought can lead to perpetual apathy, an agnostic avoidance of the hope that Christ will change the world, bring to completion to the work begun in the kingdom he proclaimed. Other Christians think that Christ's Parousia is at the heart of the gospel. They look in newspapers to perceive and confirm signs of the end times talked of in the Bible and vice-versa. Focused on the last things, they can be tempted to fall into a state of perpetual anxiety. But Jesus calls us to watchful faith: neither apathetic nor anxiety-inducing. It's a faith that is alive, breathing, serving, living not from the present, but from the point of view of the future that God will bring to pass, first talked of in Isaiah 2 and more fully tasted in the person and word of Jesus.

Some of my comments are taken from Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 1