

CHOOSE YOUR VISION WELL

Advent 2: Prepare the Way of the Lord

Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12

Here we are, at Advent 2.

Anticipation . . . is building.

Last Sunday, Advent 1,

some of us were just recovering from our Thanksgiving Turkey-fest.

Now, we're actually five days into December.

Some of us have put out our window candles
and manger scenes and Christmas trees.

This sanctuary itself is looking more festive this week,
colorful origami Christmas trees all over the place.

In our homes, our neighborhoods, our retail districts,
and in our churches,
people are getting into the season.

Somehow, as the season progresses,
and the lights, candles, and colors grow,
we start to feel, not only nostalgic,
but actually a little more hopeful.

There's something about Advent and Christmas
that encourages optimism, even in down times,
that allows good cheer to get pumped into
the various systems of our lives.

It gets into our *own* circulatory system,
into our blood, emotionally and viscerally,
and into our social systems,
the traditions that shape our families and communities,
and into the economic and corporate systems that
benefit from the up-tick in buying and consuming,
and certainly, *also*, into the liturgical rhythms of the church.

It's a season of worship we all look forward to.

You know, as much as society has now marginalized the church . . .
as post-Christian and secular as our culture is . . .
nearly the whole fabric of Western society,
is right now being impacted in a *huge* way

by the Christian calendar,
the yearly cycle that begins every year with Advent.

But let's not deceive ourselves.

The world is completely oblivious to

the real significance of the Advent season.

Advent is historically a season of fasting for the church—

in which Christians prepared themselves spiritually for the feast
that celebrated God's incarnation in the person of Jesus.

Advent is a season for spiritual cleansing, repenting, reflecting,
and sitting in silence.

But our Christmas-obsessed culture doesn't even have a clue.

For our culture, Advent is not a season of fasting, but of gluttony.

But it's probably a good thing Advent is ignored

by our materialistic, consumeristic, and hedonistic culture
that has already co-opted and corrupted

two of the major feasts of our faith—Christmas and Easter—

At *least* they haven't messed with Advent.

Or so I *thought*, until this past week.

I learned that Harrods,

the famous luxury department store in London,

was putting up for sale an exclusive, high-end Advent calendar
with a price tag of one million dollars U.S.

Patterned after the same concept we use here in worship,

of opening boxes during Advent,

to reveal something hidden behind the door,

that helps tell the Advent story.

Some of you use Advent calendars at home,

opening a door each day to reveal a scripture verse,

an image, an inspirational thought,

or perhaps a humble call to service.

Advent calendars call us back

to the simple and profound truths of the season.

Harrods' Advent calendar? *Not* so much.

Billed as a gift for that very special Christian in your life,

this is a gleaming, high-tech box, 6 feet tall,

with 24 neon-lit doors that open to reveal, among other things,
a gold watch worth \$140,000,
gold sunglasses, cuff links, writing instruments,
designer running shoes,
and the two *main* items—
too big for the box, so the pictures are behind the doors—
are a speedboat and a designer kitchen.
On sale today, for \$1,000,000.

Advent—which in the Christian tradition began
as a season of fasting, of humbling ourselves, of letting go,
in order to enter the Christmas feast with integrity,
has now been made a means to
satisfy our wildest and most luxurious dreams,
and achieve unprecedented social status.

It took us a while to get there,
but I think we've finally hit the bottom rung
of things sacrilegious.

How did we get there?
By losing sight of the biblical vision.
Our eyes got diverted.
Our *individual* eyes, yes—
but even more problematic—
and more insidious, subtle, and powerful—
our collective eyes, our communal viewpoint, our social vision—
got diverted *away* from the picture of human flourishing
that God painted for us in the scriptures.

And *that* picture of human flourishing
was laid out for us this morning in living color.
God's picture, described to us by God's prophet Isaiah,
is a picture of a reign of peace and justice and shalom.
Where the wolf lives beside the lamb,
the leopard with the goat,
the lion with the calf,
and all are led by a child.

Where there is no hurting one of another,
no destruction,
no violence,
no rebellion against God,
because all the earth knows God deeply.

We call it the peaceable kingdom.
And it's not some far-away future fantasy
that God dangles out there in front of us,
to entice us to live a Christian life.
It's *not* God's version of a movie trailer,
to get us interested and engaged.
God is not a spiritual tease.
No, it's the way God has always envisioned the world.
It's the way God created it.
And it's the way God is trying to get it to be once again,
with our cooperation.

This picture of a restored, redeemed, and reconciled creation
is a picture of what God has been working on all along,
and the kind of salvation God introduced finally in Jesus.

It is the vision that we today must gaze upon,
must become familiar with,
must allow to become our north star, our guiding vision
that shapes the way we live in this world.
It must also become *our* vision
of what human flourishing looks like.

How do we *make* it our vision?
John the Baptist tells us.
Because you see, our situation is not altogether different
than that faced by the Jews in Jesus' day.
Like us, they were a people that God was trying to get through to.
That vision of God's peaceable kingdom belonged to them, too.
But they couldn't see it.
Their communal vision had also gotten diverted elsewhere.
God wanted them right now to start living into

this vision of righteousness and justice for all,
of deeply engaging the other—the enemy—with a fierce love.
Engaging, but *not* destroying.

Like a lamb and a wolf next to each other,
engaging each other truthfully and peacefully—
but without either one needing to give up or deny
their wolf-dom or lamb-dom.

In a peaceable kingdom we co-exist,
without compromising who we are.
We deeply engage the other, without destroying them.
We assert our identity, without violence.

That was God’s vision then, as now.

But the people in Jesus’ day had lost sight of that vision.
See, they were being oppressed and occupied by a foreign power.
They all wanted to be made free, of course.
To be saved from cruel Caesar, and brutal King Herod.
But they were confused about what it *took* to be free.

Some put their hope in violent political revolution.
Some put their hope in achieving spiritual perfection,
so God would have mercy and send a Messiah,
someone to rescue and remove them from their struggle.

So some spent all their time and energy
working out how to be ethically pure,
down to the last iota of the law,
tithing even their mint, and dill, and cumin,
and making sure they didn’t make themselves unclean
by associating with lepers, loose women, or tax collectors.

While others spent all their resources figuring out
how to overthrow their oppressors with violent insurrection.

It didn’t occur to them that with God,
deep freedom was possible even *while . . . being . . . persecuted*.
It didn’t occur there might be *other* paths to the good life
besides being air-lifted out of their current one.
They didn’t see God’s wholistic vision where *everyone* flourished.
They didn’t see a vision of peace with justice that included
how they related to their own people who were poor,

or widowed, or orphaned, or marginalized in other ways.
That explains why Jesus later accused them
of being pure, but not ethical.
Of keeping the smallest letter of the law,
but neglecting the weightier matters that God cared about.
So instead of gazing on God’s vision of the peaceable kingdom,
where both lion and calf learned to flourish together,
their spiritual eyes got diverted, distracted,
they lost sight of their North Star.

That was the situation when John the Baptist arrived on the scene,
to pave the way for Jesus.

And his message was simple: Repent. (Matthew 3:2)
Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.

And the word “repent”—as I’ve mentioned before many times—
has nothing to do with feeling remorse
and trying harder next time.

It has to do with making, by choice,
a shift in our way of thinking and being.

It means to turn,
to change our point of view, and thus our behavior.

It means to choose a new vision.

To choose to see ourselves and the world in a new light.

To turn away from the old social vision,
that grew out of generations of human rebellion,
and turn toward *God’s* social vision,
God’s vision of human flourishing.

And the good news is that when we turn, God will save us.

Repentance ushers in God’s great salvation by grace.

We don’t live into God’s kingdom
just by regretting our sins and trying harder.

That’s the repentance myth that our *culture* lives by.
God’s vision of human flourishing is that we open ourselves
to God’s promise of shalom,
by making the thoughtful and careful turn,
by making the choice to face and gaze upon God’s vision.

Our task is to *choose our vision well*.

Then, God’s grace will take us there.

We fix our eyes—individually and collectively—on *God's* vision.
We nurture that vision,
by returning to it often,
by judging our way of living
against that vision,
and refocusing accordingly.
We seek God's strength, God's grace,
even as we exercise our faith,
through the spiritual disciplines
and Christian practices,
as we diligently walk toward that vision God placed before us.

We ourselves don't *create* the peaceable kingdom of God.
God *alone* has that capacity.
But we carefully choose our vision.
We choose the peaceable kingdom as our guiding vision.
And we walk toward that vision with due diligence,
trusting God our Savior to take us there.

This is happening today!
Whenever and wherever God's people
open themselves to God's saving and healing and redeeming work,
God's peaceable kingdom comes a little closer.

Wherever life triumphs in the face of death,
like it has time and time again
God's peaceable kingdom comes.
Wherever hope wins out over hopelessness,
like when a family chooses to bring a baby into this broken world,
as many families at Park View are doing these days,
God's peaceable kingdom comes.

Wherever enemies lay down their weapons and turn to love—
like some have done in South Africa or Northern Ireland,
and some, believe it or not, are doing *now*
in the Middle East, and North and South Korea—
God's peaceable kingdom comes.

Wherever someone who is spiritually bankrupt,
discovers the abundance of God's grace,

God's peaceable kingdom comes.
Wherever someone without Christ in their life,
yields themselves to the love of Jesus,
and the ethical demands of that love,
God's peaceable kingdom comes.
Wherever the grieving find comfort and reason to live,
Wherever the sick are brought to health,
Wherever the mentally ill are shown unconditional love,
Wherever the abused are given safe shelter,
Wherever an oppressed group is finally given freedom and dignity,
Wherever a polluted stream is cleaned up,
Wherever some devastated part of the earth
is brought back to life and beauty,
God's peaceable kingdom comes a little closer.

We prepare for the coming of God's kingdom, God's salvation,
by repenting of our self-oriented, and self-sufficient ways.
And choosing a new vision of human flourishing,
God's vision.

I invite us all, in the silent space that follows,
to ask ourselves where our eyes may have been diverted, distracted.
Where, in this season,
do we find ourselves focused on some vision of the good life
that is foreign to God's vision?
And how might we have the courage and the insight to repent,
to turn away, and turn toward?

Doing so is, in fact, the reason for the season of Advent.

—Phil Kniss, December 5, 2010