

“A Promise for the Future”
Isaiah 2:1-5, Matthew 24:36-44
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First Sunday of Advent

A few months ago, before the political conventions and before the fall presidential campaigns were in full swing, I got an email from a politically minded group, wanting to know which issues I considered to be important. The question was, “As you think about the future of our country, which of these issues is most important to you?” And then there was a list of a dozen or so issues or problems. They listed things like: the economy and jobs, illegal immigration, climate change, abortion and reproductive rights, trade deficits, education and student loan issues, taxes, religious freedom, prison reform, the budget deficit, LGBT rights, clean air and water, Social Security and Medicare, over regulation of business, keeping control of Wall Street, and I'm sure there were a lot more. In thinking about our future, which ones do I consider to be most important? The system in their email would only let me pick three. Which ones were most important to our country? The deficit and the economy? Religious freedom? Regulations? I kept going back and forth thinking about the future of our country: how would it be if one or another of those issues got suddenly much worse than it is right now? How would that affect our nation? But then, because like all of us I have a self-centered side, I began to think about which ones would affect me the most, which were most important to me and my family. Having kids who are still paying off student loans made me think of that issue. Also since all three of my children live in the Boston area, which is one of those areas that would be under water if the polar ice caps continue to melt, climate change came to mind. But then would they have jobs these kids and potential grandkids of mine? But what about Social Security, would it still be around in fifteen or twenty years when I'm going to need it? I never returned the questionnaire. The more I thought about it, the more each issue began to be important to me, for my future and for the future of our children, let alone our nation. It began to be too depressing to think about. What would you have said? All of those things need work if we're going to have a fruitful, peaceful future as a nation, don't you think? And that made

me think about our future, which is the topic of both our scripture lessons today.

What do you think the future holds? Are you optimistic? Or are you worried? Or do you not answer the questionnaire because you just don't want to think about it? In a May article in the *Atlantic*, writer Neal Gabler wrote as a self-described middle-class American. He confessed that if he were faced with a \$400 medical bill or car repair, he would not be able to pay it. According to Gabler, nearly half of all Americans would have trouble finding \$400 in a crisis. That kind of uncertainty produces fear, of course. Perhaps this is one of the reason that we are wanting to build walls instead of bridges, why we want to blame others as the source of our insecurity, because when we look to the future we are not only afraid, but we feel helpless and even hopeless.¹

I don't think the people of Isaiah's time or Matthew's felt any different than we do. For Isaiah in the Eighth century BC, the nation of Israel was in a precarious position on the edge of the Assyrian Empire. Half of their nation had already fallen to the cruel Assyrians and Jerusalem itself was threatened. But Isaiah's words to them are ones of hope for the future, that the day is coming when:

“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.” That must have seemed so strange to them. Almost as strange as it seems to us. Swords into plowshares. Battleships into housing units. Tanks into tractors. It's spending our money and our time and our efforts on things that aren't for our protection but for production, not for weapons but for the welfare of all. Is that how you envision our future? That's the challenge that Isaiah gives to his people: can you think about a future where there are no threats, no worries about security, where your concern is to go up to the mountain of the Lord so that he can teach us his ways. How would it be when our main concern is how are we going to find time to learn more?

Matthew's community must have been worried and afraid as well. They are mainly Jewish Christians and they have lived through the time when the city of Jerusalem has been leveled by the Roman armies.

¹ Quoted in *The Christian Century*, Reflections on the Lectionary, Calvin Chinn. November 9, 2016

It is now twenty years after all the Jews have been expelled from Jerusalem, there is no more Temple, no place for them as Jewish Christians to remember the places where Jesus walked and worshiped. And the Romans are not very friendly to the Christians either. Each new emperor seems to demand that he be worshiped as a god in an effort to unify the empire under one religion. Christians just can't do that. So Matthew writes to them to remain faithful even in times of distress or outright persecution. What kind of future will they have? They've been promised life after this with Jesus in heaven, but what happens here and now? Why isn't Jesus coming back like he said he would?

For two thousand years, the church has struggled with living in, as Karl Barth called it, the “in-between” time. We live in a time in between Christ's coming as a child in Bethlehem and Christ's return sometime in the future. How do we live like that? What do we know about his return? What do we know about the end of history and what God will do? Actually Jesus is pretty specific about what we know. He says that he will return. He says that no one knows when, so it's pointless to even try to guess. That's what most of this passage is about. He gives the illustrations of the time of Noah and then of the men in the field and the women working, and then of the thief breaking into the house. Now unfortunately, some people in our generation have read into this passage some belief that before Jesus returns that people will disappear from the earth and some others will be left behind to face a time of terror and tribulation. That's not what Matthew believed or had in mind in this passage. This is all about how unexpected the coming of Jesus will be and that we are supposed to be ready. The verb here has nothing to do with being caught up in the air or going to heaven, it means be “taken alongside.” It means being found on Jesus' side of things. If you read this chapter and the next one in Matthew, he sees the world divided into competing kingdoms of light and dark, of righteous and not. He is warning Christians of a coming judgment, but it has to do with what we do here on earth. Jesus will return to earth, and when he does, according to Matthew we will be judged on how we tended the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and the imprisoned.

So the teaching of the church through the centuries has affirmed the three things that we believe about

the Second Advent of Jesus Christ. We believe he will return. We have no idea when and it's pointless to speculate. And that until he comes, we should be about his business. We are his hands and feet, we are his voice and his presence in the world. That's why in scripture the church is called the Body of Christ. We represent him. We are Christ to the world.

How does this make you feel about the future? Are you optimistic? Are you fearful? These texts are a promise for the future. They tell us that no matter what, the future is in the hands of God. One of the quotes that is on the wall of my office that I look at every day is one by the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr: "Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone, therefore we must be saved by love."

A church that puts its trust, puts its future in the hands of God, will look at the world not with pessimism but with faith and hope and love. I hope that's what we see.