

Year A, Advent I
Isaiah 2:15; Psalm 122;
Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 24:37-44
St. Catherine's Episcopal Church
November 27, 2016

“Esperar”: to hope. “Esperar”: to wait. In Spanish the same verb means both “to wait” and “to hope”. The word for hope in Spanish comes from the same root, “esperanza”. I can imagine Mary, a young girl of perhaps fourteen or fifteen years of age, waiting and hoping. With each day that goes by, as she feels the child move within her, she waits with “esperanza”. When our group from St. Catherine's Episcopal and St. Teresa's Roman Catholic communities visited Spain several years ago, one of the most beautiful churches we visited was that of Our Lady of Esperanza in Sevilla, housing an exquisite likeness of Mary. Like Mary, in this season, we wait and we hope. This first Sunday of Advent, when we begin a new Church year, we focus on hope.

Hope is the theme of our readings for today. First, in the prophet Isaiah, we read about a political cataclysm in the 8th Century, B.C.E., when the kings of Israel had offered to pay tribute for protection from invaders. Isaiah proclaims the vision of a new Israel where tribute will be no more because all kingdoms will come to the “mountain of the Lord's house.” And then comes the vision of universal peace where “they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.” No one will learn war anymore. Anyone reading a daily newspaper would agree we are far from that vision today. But this vision has given people hope. A few years ago one organization provided people with pins made of metal from a scrapped bomber, molded into the shape of a plowshare as a reminder of that vision from Isaiah.

In today's second lesson from Romans, Paul, who also senses the immediacy of Jesus' return, focuses not on when it will be or what it will be like, but how we should live as expectant people. Paul tells us to be awake, lay aside works of darkness, put on the armor of light, and live honorably. He doesn't have any interest in doomsayers or seers predicting destruction. What Paul wants is for people to behave like disciples, followers of Jesus.

Being a disciple is always a life of tension. Paul says we are supposed to honor the civil authority but not be subject to it when it threatens our freedom. Earlier in Romans he has taught us that we are responsible for the new humanity, a new moral order. But it's not a morality of just being pure as the driven snow. No, this is a gutsy morality that stands against oppression, injustice, and anything the state does because it suits the state. Treating others with respect and dignity is a part of it. Actively seeking peace and justice and refusing to participate in actions that lead to violence are the rest.

We have just come through one of the most painful political campaigns I can remember. When I first started voting, the voting age was 21, so that means I've voted in 13 presidential elections. I cannot remember anything resembling the rancor, foul language and absolute lack of civility that we have just witnessed on all sides. It is my prayer that each of us might stand as examples to others around us that Jesus invites discourse, not rancor. Jesus often backed away from a fight

and, equally often, when his defense of justice for the needy took precedence, stood up to the oppressors. May we follow his example, be kind to one another in our speech and demeanor, and be an example of how to disagree and not be disagreeable. I pray for peace and forbearance in these weeks and months ahead. You and I, each of us, can choose to be that healing presence in the world.

Jesus' words today from Matthew's Gospel are part of the apocalypse teachings where Jesus addresses people's concerns about the end of times. He does this from the Mount of Olives where he's about to experience his own arrest, trial, and crucifixion. Jesus was certainly aware of what lay before him as he spoke. Jesus gives us a vision of the universal nature of the end of times. It will affect everyone, believer and nonbeliever alike. People engaged in work, and people partying are two extremes of those who will be caught up in the coming of the Son of Man. Jesus says, "Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left."

People were just as curious in Jesus' day as now about what the end of times would look like. They wanted to know when, who, and what they had to do to be saved. Jesus doesn't answer these questions directly. He wants people to live a different way, not to be afraid of living altogether. In the popular series of "left behind" books by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, there's a focus on the last days, the end of life as we know it. Topics like "the rapture" where some are spirited away and others left behind, great battles between good and evil, and the triumph of faithful Christians are the stock and trade of this 12book series.

While we wait and hope, what do we do? Can we, as responsible disciples, live in a way to bring about the Kingdom? Can we make the vision of Isaiah come true? No, not if we think we're the only people who can. Our job in Advent is to break down barriers that separate us from others, to find in others, including those not of our faith, the potential new humanity. Advent is not just a time of quiet waiting. It should be a time of active searching— searching for the spark of Jesus in others, repairing and polishing our own armor of light, and looking for hope when people say there isn't any. Advent isn't just about getting ready for Christmas. It's a separate, intense season of looking for, and listening for, the hope planted by God within each of us. It's a time of shutting out darkness, refusing to accept it as part of life. Even though it is the darkest part of the year for us, Advent is a time to light the lamps and scatter the darkness, for ourselves and for others, to kindle that spark of hope within us.

There is something that goes hand-in-hand with hope, and that's "risk". We risk that the thing hoped for may not come or may not come in the way we expect it. Risking is important. Psychologist Leo Buscaglia puts the need to risk this way: "To laugh ... is to risk appearing the fool. To weep ... is to risk appearing sentimental. To reach out for another ... is to risk involvement. To expose feelings ... is to risk exposing our true self. To place our ideas and dreams before the crowd ... is to risk loss. To love ... is to risk not being loved in return. To live ... is to risk dying. To hope ... is to risk despair. To try at all ... is to risk failure. But, to risk, we must, because the greatest hazard in life ... is to risk nothing."

Wait, hope, risk, act. May the child of Bethlehem continue to grow in your hearts during these weeks of hope and expectation—“esperanza.” Amen.