

Choosing to Focus on What Matters 2022
Isaiah 2:1-5 Romans 13:8-14

Isaiah 2:1-5 (New Revised Standard Version)

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. 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. 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. 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. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!

Romans 13:8-14 New Revised Standard Version

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

When I ran a small business with a number of retail stores,
sometimes, things would get a bit sloppy and careless---
- not quite as polite and attentive to customers as I expected
- the store itself not quite as clean and orderly as I insisted
- the fervor & effort toward excellence had somehow gotten a bit dull.

So I would call for a store meeting and bring in all the employees,
and we'd talk about our goals, purpose, how things were going,
and some necessary changes in our operations and attitudes.

And those meetings always ended with a clearer sense of direction.
With that renewed motivation, things would significantly improve,
and my employees were always more attentive & effective
after we'd those meetings to make things work better.

I believe that we all have a natural and innate desire for better,
for the quality and effectiveness of our lives to make a difference.

I don't accept that people intend to get careless and ineffective,
but it just sort of leaks and sneaks up on us quietly & gradually,
toward a downward spiral of **self-defeating complacency**.

So too I don't think anybody intends for their faith to fade & grow dim
but that it happens quietly and gradually, almost without notice,
as we slip a bit, grow weary, our faith & discipleship complacent.

Sometimes we slide into a comfortable rut of the routine and mundane,
and fall into a downward spiral of spiritual surrender and apathy,
rather than the gracious good and peace that God intends for us.

The prophet Haggai provides a poetic description and insight, 1:6-7

You have sown much, and harvested little; you eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill; you clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; and you that earn wages earn wages to put them into a bag with holes. Thus says the Lord of hosts: **Consider how you have fared.**

Advent offers us a meaningful opportunity to reexamine and reassess
any such destructive or **soul-defeating downward spiral of faith**
toward complacent compromise or apathy in our spiritual lives.

Like those store meetings, it's a useful and opportune timely season
to reflect on our spiritual-health and our relationship with God,
and perhaps look for any obstacles to God's work in our lives,
all that hinders, all that pollutes and all that interferes.

I compare it to scraping the barnacles off the hull of our life-boat.

And sometimes, we just need to stop and pause to reflect.

I read recently about Johannes Gutenberg getting stressed
trying to figure out, trying to invent the printing press.

It seems that he got stuck while pondering a design problem,
as in his frustration, there was no answer or insight coming.

Some friends were getting concerned about him.

They insisted that he needed to take a break,
and got him to attend a wine festival with them.

At the festival he noticed a wine press. Inspired,
days later built his first printing press prototype.

Advent can be a time to step back from life's stress & pressure,
to stop and pause to refocus, and listen for a God-message.

Advent is our time to pause & reflect, to attend more carefully
to the feeding and deepening, nurturing and growth of our souls.

On this, the first Sunday of Advent, **our focus is on hope:**

God's active grace past, present & future, the promise & truth
because Jesus has come, is present now, and will come again.

**In hope, we're awake, willing & ready – that is the point of Advent,
for the direction we're looking will influence the direction we go.**

**Advent hope is listening attentively to God with humility and trust,
and concentrating on God's will for our walk and work in this world,
by being faithful in whatever situation we have been placed.**

This is an intentional shift toward a more hopeful perspective

by considering our present in the context of God's promises,
a critical message we need to hear on this first Sunday of Advent.

The point of the Isaiah passage we read is a similar message of hope.
It was written soon after the Assyrian Empire had conquered
and actually obliterated the northern kingdom of Israel.

So the remaining southern kingdom of Judah
was feeling extremely vulnerable, fearful and anxious.

It was a very scary and uncertain time for the nation.

This Isaiah text was intended as a word of hope and encouragement.

**Isaiah's message is this: don't get frantic or get so caught up
in the world of trouble and the stuff you see surrounding you
that you forget about God's promises to stand with you,
and God's promises to bring the story to a good ending.**

Historically, under God's protection, the southern kingdom
did survive and outlast the Assyrian threat and aggression.

Today the Assyrian Empire no longer exists, but Israel still thrives.

This Isaiah passage offers **a hopeful vision and call for Advent**
that reminds us that God's promises and God's presence are with us,
and that the Light of the Lord is real and it cannot be snuffed out.

In fact, speaking through the prophet,
we're given a picture of when God's Kingdom prevails looks like,
the true peace and hope that God will bring about, vs. 4-5.

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. ... **come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!**

The point is, that Advent is not about **us getting Christmas right,**
but for us to connect with whatever the Lord God is doing and up to,
trusting and confident, **the promises of God will be fulfilled.**

So today, as we begin our Advent journey, we are being warned
that we can easily miss the main point & blessing that God intends,
by overly focusing and fussing about all the outward things,
and preoccupied with the glitter & gratifying every desire...

... or so driven that we miss the most important message of Christmas,
that God loves us, and that God came to us as a vulnerable baby...

... and that if we are attentive, if we look and listen with our hearts,
then we will recognize events & places where God and God's grace
are visibly at work, **if we're not too distracted to notice.**

It's choosing to listen, to let God speak and transform our lives.

It's being faithful in whatever circumstance we have been given.

It's getting ready by setting aside time for spiritual reflection,
and listening for the will, the word and the wisdom of God.

What I am describing is an important and hopeful truth ---
that God knows us and loves each one of us in particular,
and is fully aware of what we most truly & urgently need.

To be very practical, sometime during this Advent season, I believe
God is going to speak and reach out to each of us with grace anew.

**And at some point along our Advent journey toward Christmas
God will speak and embrace us in a unique and meaningful way,
so we can receive God's gracious love anew and afresh
as it overflows into our hidden poverty and true need.**

**There will be clear and definitive "God-moments" along the way
that will make a difference, and bless our journey of faith,
if in hope, we are awake and ready, willing and waiting
to embrace God's gracious call to hope in God's promises.**

My fellow Advent-travelers, if we want a truly wonderful Christmas
it begins with having an open, thankful and receptive heart,
ready and attentive to the grace and blessings and call...

... to live in renewed awareness of what's going on in us spiritually,
which was Paul's message to the Christians living in Rome, vs 8, 10

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, **love is the fulfilling of the law.**

The call to love is tied to an awakening toward our future hope, vs. 11

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and **put on the armor of light.**

Our hope is the assurance that surely Jesus will indeed come again.

So obviously salvation, the promised vision of Isaiah, the KOG,
is nearer now than it was before, so awaken and remain alert,
since we can and often do slack-off in our Christian journey,
& drowse into worldly allure toward spiritual slothfulness.

Therefore, Paul urges Christians in Rome to awaken, and to live well
as becomes a believer awaiting the coming of Lord Jesus, vs. 13-14

Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, **put on the Lord Jesus Christ**, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Paul's message is to shake off any compromise or complacency,
and awaken into a discipleship that fulfills God's will
into the promise and hope of God's Kingdom, by putting on Christ...
... so to walk in the true light of the world, our Lord Jesus,
who overcomes the darkness of despair, fear and defeat.

During Advent season we prepare as Christians for the birth of Jesus,
by anticipating his coming, his return and joyful fulfillment
of the prophetic promise and hopeful vision of grace and peace.

We do this by awakening anew, and putting on **our Lord Jesus Christ,**
by concentrating on God's will for our walk & work in this world,
by being faithful in whatever situation we have been placed,
as empowered afresh and renewed to **put on the armor of light.**

For many people, the holidays are a struggle and a difficult season,
because they are missing loved-ones, or anxious about an illness.

Some are dealing with disappointment or troubled circumstances,
or just facing another frantic season of endless demands.

But our texts today urge us to re-focus on our hope in the Lord,
for the direction we're looking will influence the direction we go.

Now I don't know exactly what God does have in mind for us this year,
but I do know this --- I don't want to miss whatever God intends.
for attentive to God, we can move toward our best,
as we support and encourage the best in others.

Today, along with Christians from around the world,
we light the first candle of our four-week journey of Advent...
... not hunkered down in fear, doubt, dread or terror, but
but standing together in faith, trusting in God's grace.

And that is the message and the truth about Advent,
a vision that can help keep our hope alive,
by being alert to what matters most and lasts.