

GATHERING IN THE WORD OF GOD

For us in the Church—Advent is a time of awe, surprise and wonder. Great things are happening in the world as well as in all our lives. GOD has a vision for human history and our own moment by moment lives. The birth and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth—continuous with the dreams of the Hebrew prophetic tradition—brings about a new array of possibilities for creative transformation.

Advent is a time for action, persistence and devotion. While some of us wait for a divine rescue operation—the First Sunday of Advent asks us to be active, energetic, and full of life. The Scriptures invite us to walk, to go, to stay awake, to put on the *armor of light*, and be ready!

Faithfulness to GOD calls us to action based on our experience of GOD's present possibilities and vision in and around us—luring us all to tomorrow's challenges.

HEARING THE WORD OF GOD

Isaiah 2:1-5 (The VOICE Bible)

2 ¹This is what Isaiah (son of Amoz) prophesied about Judah and *its capital* Jerusalem:

² There will come a time in the last days when the mountain where the Eternal's house stands will become the highest, most magnificent—grander than any of the mountains around it. And all the nations *of the world* will run there, *wanting to see it, feel it, and fully experience it.*

³ Many people *of all languages, colors, and creeds* will come.

People: Come! Let's go to the Eternal's mountain, to the house of the God of Jacob, so that we might learn from Him how best to be, to go along *in life* as He would have us go. After all, the law will pour out from Zion, the word of the Eternal, from Jerusalem. ⁴ God will decide what's fair among nations and settle disputes among all sorts of people.

Meanwhile, they will hammer their swords into sickles; reshape their spears into pruning hooks. One nation will not attack another. They will not practice war anymore.

Isaiah sees an amazing picture of the future, a future which only God can create. In that vision, Jerusalem and the temple of the only God will sit on the highest mountain at the center of the world. In that day, all the nations of the world will stream to the holy city and seek God's guidance and instruction. God will sit as King and Judge, dispensing real justice—not some man-made counterfeit—not only in international but also local matters. Perhaps, most amazingly for a world weary of war, this will be a time when war is a thing of the past and its lethal instruments are turned into tools for life and peace.

⁵ O house of Jacob—*people of the promise*—come, come walk with me by the light of the Eternal.

Today begins a new church year (Year A in the Revised Common Lectionary 3-year cycle of scripture lessons) and the Old Testament texts remind us that the coming of GOD's Messiah has a whole lot to do with warfare and

fighting. Curiously, Isaiah 2 teaches us that unlearning the arts of war will be the first effects of people being drawn to GOD's holy mountain. **When we learn GOD's ways-we unlearn the ways of war.**

Neal Plantinga¹ of John Calvin Theological Seminary in Michigan **riffed** and **jammed** on Isaiah's imagery here by offering: *the day will come when Howitzer tanks will be converted into John Deere tractors to plow fields; guns will be used to build fences on which grapevines can grow; we'll turn missile silos into wheat silos and make the Pentagon into the world's largest Food Court!*

When we come to the mountain of GOD—and in this Advent Season we can affirm that when we come to the Prince of Peace—war will be one of the first agenda items to drop from the human agenda. Why? Perhaps because war is perhaps the best emblem ever of all that has gone wrong with GOD's intentions for this Creation!

Our GOD is the God of **shalom**! So what is shalom?

- ✓ Shalom means doing more than finding ways not to argue or to come to blows!
- ✓ Shalom means seeing GOD's image residing deep inside every person we encounter in and out of the church—no matter how different from "us" that other person may be!
- ✓ Shalom means not just passively accepting the fact of our inter-relatedness with each other but actively wanting to **do something to make that relationship better**. We do what we can to make others prosper and flourish!

That's why we turn swords into pruning hooks and tanks into tractors: we want to feed one another:

We want there to be enough foods and supplies to go around so that no one will be hungry again in our neighborhoods or around the world!

It is a small wonder that Jesus was born in Bethlehem: *Beth-Lehem* is "*The House of Bread.*" Our Earth was along mean to be a source of abundance, a planet-wide Garden of Eden that would sustain life in all its variety and forms!

That is why war is the opposite of GOD's design!

- ✓ That's why in war we take the differences among us as people and, instead of celebrating them as GOD's gifts, we use them as an excuse to kill each other!
- ✓ We even convince ourselves that those differences point to deficiencies in ways that actually *justify* our murderous actions.
- ✓ We find ways to develop economic schemes and programs that make it easier to deny certain people basic sustenance and rights—people who think such-and-such a way don't deserve a place at the banquet table!

In Advent we consider the One who did come and who will come again (Matthew 24) in order to make the Bread of Life available to all—and in hyper-abundance and in great supply for all!

Matthew 24:36-51 (The VOICE Bible)

³⁶ No one knows the hour or the day, not even the messengers in heaven, not even the Son. Only the Father knows. ³⁷ As it was at the time of Noah, so it will be with the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ In the days before the flood, people *were busy making lives for themselves: they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, making plans and having children and growing old*, until the day Noah entered the ark. ³⁹ Those people *had no idea what was coming; they knew nothing about the floods* until the floods were upon them, sweeping them all away. That is how it will be with the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Two men will be plowing a field: one will be taken, and the other will be left *in the field*. ⁴¹ Two women will be *somewhere* grinding at a mill: one will be taken, and the other will be left *at the mill*.

⁴² So keep watch. You don't know when your Lord will come. ⁴³ But you should know this: If the owner of a house had known his house was about to be broken into, *he would have stayed up all night, vigilantly*. He would have kept watch, and he would have thwarted the thief. ⁴⁴ So you must be ready because you know the Son of Man will come, but you can't know precisely when.

⁴⁵ The trustworthy servant is the one whom the master puts in charge of *all the servants of his household*; it is the trustworthy servant who *not only oversees all the work, but also* ensures the servants are properly fed and cared for. ⁴⁶ *And it is, of course, crucial that a servant who is given such responsibility performs his responsibility to his master's standards*—so when the master returns he finds his trust has been rewarded.

⁴⁷ For then the master will put that good servant in charge of all his possessions. ⁴⁸ But imagine *that the master's trust was misplaced*, that the supposedly responsible servant is actually a thief who says to himself, "My master has been gone so long, *he is not possibly coming back.*" ⁴⁹ Then he beats his fellow servants and dines and drinks with drunkards. ⁵⁰ *Well, when the master returns—as certainly he will—the servant will be caught unawares.* The master will return on a day and at an hour when he isn't expected. ⁵¹ And he will cut his worthless servant into pieces and throw him out *into darkness* with the hypocrites, where there is weeping and grinding of teeth.

Many are waiting and watching for the Lord's return. In verse 45, Jesus mentions that a *commendable servant* would be the one who gives the other servants their food at the proper time. The good servant is commended for making dinner! The text doesn't say what is commendable and praiseworthy about the servant—it simply says that what made him a good servant was that he made dinner and served it at the usual time—**in other words he did what he had to do in the typical days of Noah** (Matthew 24:37-38).

- ✓ Can it be that being faithful to our Lord in our everyday routines demonstrates holy watchfulness as we wait for his return?
- ✓ Is being an honest office manager or secretary, a careful school bus driver, an ethical attorney, a thoughtful housewife or househusband really a sign that we are aware that Jesus is coming back?

Yes, it is!

And if you doubt that—look at the lives of those who do not share awareness that there is a cosmic Lord named Jesus! Look at all the ethical and moral shortcuts that are available for many in our society take all the time.

- ✓ Whether it's something big like the corporate scandals that bought on the financial crisis some years ago.
- ✓ Or something comparatively smaller like the employee who uses company equipment to make invitations to her son's birthday party;
- ✓ Whether it's resolving the consequence of having quick and easy sex by getting a quick and easy abortion;
- ✓ Or taking the easy way out by pouring mercury into a river or drain rather than going through the expense of disposing the mercury properly.

Whatever the scenario—people all over the place live like there's no tomorrow and as though no one who cares is watching them anyway.

The days of Noah are our inevitable context—and according to Jesus this will remain even the church's context right up until the end. But within that setting we display our watchfulness by living as fine of a life for our great GOD in Christ as we can! In big and small things—at work, at home, at church—in what we do with our body parts as well

as what we do with our income—we do everything in the context of a GOD-infused world!

We may not see our Lord’s return. But as we go through our daily and weekly routines in these days of Noah, we certainly want it to be true that as people look at the shape of our lives—they can say also of us, “*Those Christians never give up hope. We can tell!*”

DOING THE WORD OF GOD

So what is the Word of God on this First Sunday of Advent?

1. ONE: JESUS WILL COME AGAIN!

Jesus’ return will be a profoundly good thing and so for us living with that awareness *that this is going to happen* need not make us nervous or sleepless—**but is intended to make us simply faithful!**

- ✓ We don’t have to perform heroics—walking humbly with our GOD will do!
- ✓ We don’t need to spend our days calculating time charts for when the Lord will return—living on the hope of the New Creation will do!
- ✓ We don’t need to quit our jobs in order to devote ourselves 24/ to praying--faithfulness in our calling as a witness to the Kingdom will do!

2.TWO: JESUS GIVES AND BRINGS HOPE TO US!

Jesus telling us that this is going to happen is perhaps like telling a desperately lonely person, “I cannot tell you when but I can assure you that you are going to meet someone very special one day. You will be married, you will have children, and you will be happy.

Knowing that will not erase the loneliness that will continue until that happens, but it will prevent the loneliness from having the last word! And if the lonely person believes your prophecy, despair will never take over—either!

Instead, hope will return!

3.THREE: WE THE CHURCH ARE TO DISCOVER AND LIVE OUT GOD’S VISION FOR US AND OUR CHURCH!

- ✓ We need to be self-aware and community aware!
- ✓ We need to know the signs of the times and what is required of us to be faithful in this present moment!
- ✓ GOD’s vision is always relational and concrete—it comes to us in real time and space—always evolving along with in relationship to our responsiveness!
- ✓ GOD provides to us possibilities and the energy to achieve them!

- ✓ Our collective decisions bring life or death to countless person, animal companions and our environment around us!
- ✓ We are to be motivated by GOD's dream for us and our church and for our Earth!

SENDING IN THE WORD OF GOD

Jesus is telling us *that* he is going to come again and, even if the *when* is not known, it is perhaps like telling a desperately lonely friend, "I cannot tell you when but I can assure you that you are going to meet someone very special one day. You will be married, you will have children, and you will be very happy."

Knowing that will not erase the loneliness that will continue until that happens, but it will prevent the loneliness from having the last word. And if the lonely person believes your prophesy—despair and misery will never take over—either. Instead **hope** will remain!

Watch!

With Hope!

ⁱ Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. is Senior Research Fellow at the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship and president emeritus of Calvin Theological Seminary. Cornelius Plantinga Jr. (aka Neal Plantinga) teaches a course annually in Calvin College (he was Dean of the Chapel from 1996 to 2001) and in Calvin Theological Seminary (he was a professor there from 1979 to 1996 and President from 2001 to 2011). He writes for the Worship Institute and participates in its major events as a speaker or as a host for other speakers. In connection with The Center for Excellence in Preaching at Calvin Theological Seminary, and with its Director, Scott Hoezee or with Hulitt Gloer, Neal cohosts seminars for preachers on reading for preaching—i.e., on how a program of general reading (stories, biographies, print journalism) can help the preacher become a better one. Neal preaches and speaks regularly and also writes articles and books. Neal is married to Kathleen. They have two sons, two daughters-in-law, and five grandchildren.