

January 2014

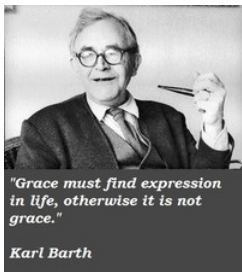
The Old Testament lectionary texts for the season of Advent this year walked us through the prophecies in Isaiah. I taught an adult Sunday School class at my church during Advent and we decided to focus on these prophecies.

Let me share just a few lines from the Isaiah passages that we read and studied during Advent:

2:4 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.

11:2 The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. 11:3 His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; 11:4 but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.

35:10 And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.



Following the advice of my favorite theologian Karl Barth, I always try “theologize” with the bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. As I was reading through these passages and preparing to teach Sunday School, I was reflecting on the hopeful nature of these prophecies while reading articles about atrocities in the Central African Republic, South Sudan, Syria, and other hotspots around the world where we have global partners and mission co-workers. It was a jarring experience.

I reflected with my Sunday School class about the season of Advent and these prophecies from Isaiah. How are the people living in these contexts experiencing Advent? Do they experience this as a season of celebration and hopeful anticipation; celebrating the birth of Jesus 2000 years ago and waiting in hopeful anticipation of Christ’s return? I sat in the Sunday School room with a warm cup of coffee in a heated building while we watched the snow fall outside and struggled through these questions with my class. We acknowledged our own privilege, that we can sit and discuss these questions in a theoretical way without having to confront them viscerally like our brothers and sisters around the world.

And from our thoughts and conversations, we were moved to action. We felt called to pray and committed to “praying the news” throughout the advent season. We felt called to support the work of our global partners and mission co-workers serving in this context. We also realized that we can spend a lot of time focusing on the negative, the personal and systemic sin, the powers and principalities of darkness that lead to so many devastating situations in the world. But we are also called to look for the hope and grace, to seek out the bright spots where God’s kingdom is breaking into our fallen world, even if it is in small ways. For it is in recognizing God’s grace and work in the world that we are able to restore our hope, live into our hope, and become a beacon of light and hope in the world.

So we pray for the day when swords will be beaten into plowshares while we look for the places where that is happening and we do what we can to make that hope a reality. We pray for a savior to come with a spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, who decides with equity for the meek of the earth while we look for places where that savior is already at work and we take it upon ourselves to adopt that spirit in the way we live our lives. We pray for everlasting joy, hoping that all in the world shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away while we look for glimpses of that in the world and we put ourselves to work to achieve that God-ordained vision.

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