

December 2, 2007

Isaiah 2: 1-5; Matthew 24: 36-44

“Let Us Walk in the Light of God!”

If only the owner of the house knew what time the burglars were showing up! Then the police could be notified to be present, or traps could be set along with video surveillance. That’s a lot to do if you want to be ready for a thief. A home owner would definitely have to rearrange ordinary life around preparation for a thief. I mean, who has the police constantly waiting at the end of one’s driveway, just in case a thief comes by in the next hour? Who has traps continually set over every inch of the house, just in case a burglar tries to grab something? Life would have to be severely changed in order to be ready for and catch a burglar successfully at any random moment. It would be great to have advance notice of a thief’s plans, but that doesn’t seem to be the way thieves operate. They don’t send a little note in the mail saying, “I’ll be robbing your house next Thursday between the hours of 2 a.m. and 3.” Quite the opposite. They depend upon the element of surprise for a successful robbery.

Once when I had to be out of town for several days for a Presbyterian type meeting, I came home to find that my husband had purchased one of those home alarm systems. Aha, now we’ll have those burglars outsmarted, or at least that is the idea. So now we have a sign pitched in a flower bed that says something like “This house protected by ADT.” Randy and I each carry little remote control units with our keys so that we don’t continually set the thing off when we come home. Even so, I have done that a couple of times. At least the thing gives me 60 seconds of grace to run to the main unit and punch in a secret code before it alerts a dispatcher.

But even that didn’t work the other day. Somehow, when Randy and I were hurriedly trying to leave the house for something, one of us apparently accidentally pushed a button on one of our little handheld remote controls, and activated the alarm. We both heard the thing utter one of its canned electronic phrases, like “Alarm activated – disarm now,” but we ignored it, thinking that some recent small power outages had messed up the machine’s routine.

Sixty seconds later, a loud, high-pitched wail engulfed our house, and most probably could be heard a block away! The alarm was screaming at us, so in a panic, we scrambled to the main unit and tried to disarm the thing. But it was not to be swayed. We punched numbers, and frantically went through a nearby desk looking for instructions, all in an effort to make the screaming siren stop. For a brief moment, I wondered if a fire truck would be pulling up soon and if a SWAT team would come crashing through our windows with uzis before this was all over.

After a minute went by that felt like a week, a voice came over a little speaker. “What is your password?” The voice said. Password? Well, to make a long story short, neither Randy nor I could remember the password. The dispatcher was probably stifling giggles as she talked with us, as we were clearly a couple of cowed and bumbling homeowner fools rather than burglars. She finally gave us hints at our password, we

were so pitiable, and even then we still couldn't guess. After much panic and fumbling, we resolved the incident without police intervention.

I am sure each of you takes a certain degree of precaution to avoid becoming a victim of crime. If you don't have an alarm system, and I don't necessarily recommend one, you no doubt lock the doors of your home or your car and you don't leave your personal information or house or car keys lying around for just anyone to see or take. You probably keep your money in a bank. You probably think twice before walking down dark scary alleys, and so forth.

Jesus uses just such an attitude of precaution and readiness for an example as he urges his followers to be watchful and living as if the promises of God are knocking at the door. A householder can't know exactly when a burglar will hit, and so a follower of Jesus can't just sit around saying, "Oh, the coming of God's earthly rule isn't going to come in my lifetime." A follower of Jesus must live in a state of preparation for that earthly rule as if it is just about to happen. No one knows when exactly this will happen. It isn't written on a calendar, and it isn't something with a press release attached. It is coming with the wisdom, insight, and perfect timing of God. Our job is to live as if it can happen at any time.

The prophet Isaiah proclaims a vision of the earthly rule of God. It is a vision of a promise that will be, but is not yet. It is a promise from God that is going to happen, but is not yet realized. The promise is very sure, and it is on its way to the earth. On the other hand, we do not know when it is going to appear in our midst.

The vision is that of the nations of the world clearing their minds, coming to their senses, and seeking the wisdom of God. They will seek out God to arbitrate their disputes instead of violence. They will become students of God's laws and wisdom and justice instead of students of warfare. Instead of settling differences by dropping bombs or beating one another into submission with military threats and force, the nations will seek out the ways and wisdom of God. A "peacetime economy" is described, one in which the resources and the capabilities of the people are redirected. It isn't enough that the swords and spears are melted down to no longer harm other people. Their limited materials are reformed to become instruments of life, plowshares and pruning hooks, inaugurating a reign of peace. Human energies are redirected from warfare into producing food in abundance. In this vision, the economy is transformed, but additionally the very earth is transformed. The earth is changed from scarred battleground to fertile garden, to a type of Eden, once again. Things are transformed, and they are also restored and "put right."

The call to the people of faith – that would be you – is to walk in the light of the LORD. In other words, if you already live with the knowledge of God, you are charged with the task of living as if these things are already on earth. They are already with you. How will anyone know about God's vision for the world unless someone starts to live it out and show it to the world?

“Come, let us walk in the light of the LORD.” That means that you and I are to take the first steps on the path that all the nations will one day tread. You and I are to be guided by this vision, this promise of what is coming, though we know not when. The promised vision is not a probability, it is a statement of the certainty that history will reach its goal, and that God will lead the nations and all the peoples of the world to a time of utter transformation of existing conditions, from nationalism and conflict to unity and peace. Resources will be turned from inflicting harm and pain into tools for sustaining life in all its fullness.

How tempting it is for us, in an era of military conflict, nationalism, and international mistrust, to simply write off Isaiah’s proclamation as unrealistic or as something that can only happen beyond time and history, but never within it. It is most possibly unrealistic to expect peace among all nations in the immediate future. So then, what are we to do? Do we just give up on God’s promise to us? Do we say, “It’ll never happen”? Do we capitulate to the self-promoting powers and tired ways of this world?

“Come, let us walk in the light of the LORD.” You know, they said there would be a horrible “blood bath” in South Africa if the black population ever dominated the white population. The system of Apartheid held a terrible grip, until the vision of Isaiah took hold. People of good will around the world saw a vision of justice and righteousness in that place, and applied economic sanctions and pressures. When a true democratic process was imposed and monitored, the black population did come into power in a manner such as they had not seen for quite a while. But a small though powerful man, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, had seen that equality could be real, through the outreach to him personally by a white priest when he was a boy. He was one of the leaders of this peaceable revolt, and gave clear, concrete guidance to the process of establishing reconciliation in the dramatic change of the system. The vision of God’s justice and wisdom is not just “pie in the sky.” The problem is, we don’t take it seriously as often as we need to take it seriously.

“Come, let us walk in the light of the LORD.” This passage speaks to us of the power of expectation. Advent is all about expectation, of looking forward, of anticipating the inbreaking of God into our world. As we hear Isaiah’s words, how can we not have our hope for God’s peace and justice rekindled? Here is a promise, now we must keep the hope for it alive. Surely this promise of God’s coming reign on earth cannot come among us unless we have – and unless we keep alive in every generation – the vision of that reign.

Do we know when God’s reign will come on earth? Of course not. Do you know when to have your burglar alarm on or when to lock your front door? Well, you can give it your best guess, but you can’t know exactly when a burglar plans to come a-robbing. However, you can live in a state of preparedness, and you can take precautions as if it could happen. Just so, no one knows when God’s reign on earth will be established. This does not mean we can be lulled into a state of, “It’s never gonna happen. It never has, and it never will.” No. The promise is before us. God’s coming reign is going to happen. Are you ready to lay the groundwork for it, and to live as if it is already part of

your life, as if you are already a citizen of this great unseen nation of God's rule that is unfolding on the earth? "Come, let us walk in the light of the LORD." Amen.