

Something is About to Happen  
Isaiah 2:1-5  
Collegiate Presbyterian Church  
November 28, 2010

In a book of Advent sermons, Tom Long tells the story of a member of one of the congregations he had served. In a Sunday morning spiritual formation class of folks who were “searchers” and were wondering about why they stayed in church, he punched the air with his finger saying “I’ll tell you what keeps me coming to this church. It’s strange, I know, but I get the feeling here, like nowhere else, that something is about to happen.”<sup>1</sup> Something is about to happen.<sup>1</sup>

It is the first Sunday of Advent, and yes, we know that something is about to happen. We even know what is about to happen. We await the birth of our Savior. We await the coming to earth of our God. We await nothing less than the redemption of the world.

Unfortunately, there are those for whom the advent waiting grows too long. Culturally we are already into the “season” of Christmas, and have been there since before Halloween! We seem to ride roughshod over the season of waiting and jump headlong into the season of buying. Do we really believe that something is about to happen? Dare we even hope that something is about to happen?

Peter Gomes, chaplain and theologian at Harvard Divinity School, confesses that Advent is his least favorite season because while the major theme of Advent is hope, there is a lot about the world in which we live that is devoid of hope. And don’t we know it. In a world wracked by wars and rumors of wars, in a society with an unemployment rate in the double digits, in a city of relative wealth that cannot find ways to shelter the homeless, in homes where children are not fed, or where children are not safe, in families that cannot find the joy of this season because of dysfunction or loss, the contrast of superficial jollity and frivolity, the forced happiness, contrast boldly.

And yet, we also know that something is about to happen.

The late Joseph Sittler, theologian at Chicago Divinity School writes:

I do not believe we are in a very good situation historically. I do not believe our relationship to the earth is liable to change for the better until it gets catastrophically worse. Our record indicates that we can walk with our eyes wide open straight into sheer destructiveness if there is a profit on the way...But I do go around planting trees on campus.

Even when we can see no hope, we are reminded in Advent that something is about to happen.

The prophet Isaiah lived in times not unlike our own. Israel’s neighbors were teaming up to invade the tiny country. Everyone was aware of the saber rattling at the border. Even

the king was frightened. What would happen to them? How would they cope? What was in store in the future?

And the oracle, the word from God must have been, just as it is now, profoundly surprising. We're so used to it, it has become familiar. But consider how deeply hopeful these words are, how in the face of dread, despair and fear, they offer a new view of reality, that God will usher in.

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.

The prophet tells the story of perfect peace, that place where instruments of death are turned into implements for life, for harvesting the fields, and where nations don't study war anymore. And, the vision of Isaiah doesn't just fill one corner of the globe. Isaiah describes a day when many peoples will come to the house of God, when many nations will come to live in the ways of justice and peace. This vision provides hope for a better world, hope for a new world, a world put right, a world as God created it to be. A hope for a healed world. Not just the healing of one nation. Not just the healing of the United States, but also the healing of Iraq and Palestine, of Israel and Afghanistan. Yes even the healing of Korea and the Sudan. That is God's vision, that is nothing short of God's promise to us.

Beyond the celebrations of the coming of the Messiah, beyond the holiday parties and ringing in of the new calendar year, as we move into another bone-chilling snowy Iowa winter, it becomes more and more clear that the promised days of God's peace are not here yet. And despite the predictions of those who would tell us they know when and where the end will come, No one knows when and where. Not the angels, not the messiah, only God knows.

For many of us, the notion of the end times and judgment are the equivalent of an embarrassing relative, still present but best to be ignored. And despite the Biblical emphasis on the last days, we struggle to make sense of how, now two thousand years after the incarnation, we continue to wait for the completion of the realm of God. We live in a continuing state of hope, hope that the promises will come true. Glimpsing little pieces of God's glory in the world, but waiting for the time when that glory will suffuse the whole of creation. Knowing that something is about to happen, we live in hope. But sometimes it is oh so difficult to sustain that hope.

I have been thinking lately a lot about what kills hope, or what is the opposite of hope. When there seems to be no hope, what is left? Despair certainly. Anguish can be the by product of hopelessness. So can gloom or depression or desolation or sadness or misery or despondency. Anger can result from hopelessness. If there is no need there is nothing for which to hope. If there is nothing promised, there can be no real hope. If we expect little, there is no hope. In the absence of hope all kinds of ugliness grows. Fear, anger,

result. In fact fear may be the exact opposite of hope, because fear results in our shutting out the best parts of ourselves and shielding ourselves from what we fear. Fear leads to hate and to war and to injustice. Fear leads us to be emotionally paralyzed and closed to anything new. Fear can cause us to panic, to think poorly, to react rather than to act. Fear leads us to label others as them. Fear causes us to demonize other people. Fear casts out our best judgment and leaves us worried about what will happen. Yes I think fear is the opposite of hope, the opposite of faithfulness.

But being faithful, we reject fear in favor of God's word to us, a vision of something that isn't here yet, but is an alternative vision of God's creation as God intended it. Healed. Mended. Reconciled. Peaceful. Faithfulness means remembering the vision, never letting it go, hoping for it, praying for it and working for it. Believing that something is about to happen.

And work it is. Hope is hard work. To sustain hope we need to throw ourselves into the struggle for the realization of hope. To hope for justice and peace means to work for justice and peace. To hope for a time when there are no more people who live in tents by the river, means to find some homeless people and house them. To hope for a time when there are no more hungry children living in the land of abundance means to find hungry children and feed them. To hope for a time when there is war no more means working for peace, in our homes, in our churches, in our society, and in our world.

Something is about to happen. And we are partners with God in keeping that hope alive. Advent hope keeps the light glowing in the midst of darkness. That hope, that light will not be defeated, extinguished or silenced. That hope sets us free to truly engage the world, to serve without fear because we know that our future is held secure in God's hands.

There are those who think that Advent is a time of quiet waiting. Instead, let it be a time of activity! Searching for the spark of Jesus in others, keeping hope alive in places where it is hard to find hope, and yes, even believing that something is about to happen.

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<sup>1</sup> Long, Thomas G., *Something is about to Happen...Sermons for Advent and Christmas*. CSS Publishing Co, Lima Ohio. 1987, p. 9.

This sermon was based on an article by John Buchanan in the *Journal for Preachers*, Advent 2010. It is not fully footnoted.