

Faith Mennonite Church
Advent 1: December 2, 2007

“Would Christ Return at Christmas?”
Isaiah 2:1-5; Matthew 24:36-44

Allow me to share a few scenes from my week:

Scene 1: On the back window in the fellowship area, in the row of videos and DVDs—one of the legacies of Patty Friesen’s ministry here,—there is a BBC series, *the Vicar of Dibley*. If you’re not acquainted with the series, it’s about the encounter of a small sleepy parish in rural England with many colorful characters and a new vicar, Geraldine, who’s anything but small and sleepy. Geraldine inherits a personal assistant, Alice, who worked with the previous, aging Vicar who fell asleep one Sunday as he was preaching and never woke up. Alice is rather feather-brained and slow to catch on to most everything.

In the episode I watched on Monday evening, Alice approached the vicar with a serious question: “Vicar, last Sunday in your sermon, you said that Jesus was coming. Well, could you tell me which day he’s arriving? Me mum would like to straighten up the house a bit.”

Scene 2: On Tuesday morning as I was driving to the church and listening to NPR’s Morning Edition, I heard the news that the senior senator from Mississippi had announced his retirement, effective at the end of this year. He credited his decision to having gone to church on Thanksgiving weekend and hearing the words of Ecclesiastes, “there is a time and a season...” According to the report he had planned to retire previously but after Hurricane Katrina he stayed in office in order to leverage his influence to benefit the citizens of Mississippi affected by the disaster. Now, however, he and his wife had decided that the time had come.

The story went on to speculate what this man of 62 years would do. He said he loves the legislative process and will continue to be involved in it. All good so far, but then came the twist. The senator, the reporter said, is not a wealthy man. Besides the two homes he owns, one in Washington, DC and the other in Mississippi, he has only \$1.2 million in assets. On K Street where lobby offices are located in Washington, former legislative staff members can earn upwards of \$300,00 per year and someone of the senator’s stature and connections could easily garner \$1 million a year just as a consultant, during the one-year “cooling down” period required by senate rules, before he could be hired on as a full-fledged lobbyist. I don’t want to be so presumptuous or judgmental to predict what the senator will do, but according to the movie *Why we Fight*, many former legislators are attracted to the megabucks of the military-industrial complex. But perhaps he’ll return to church today, I hope, and hear the words of Isaiah, of armaments turned to plowshares.

Scene 3: An email arrived in our church email account this week from the American Family Association, an organization committed to motivate and equip citizens to change the culture to reflect Biblical truth and traditional family values. The email was decrying the fact that Kohl’s department store has, in their language taken an “In-Your-Face Attitude,” failing to keep a promise to put the word Christmas in some of their in-store as well as advertizing circulars. While Kohl’s told AFA representatives that they planned to mention Christmas in 6 of their fliers between mid-November and

New Year's Day, the AFA hasn't yet seen any such fliers. AFA considers this an effort by Kohl's to ban Christmas in deference to non-Christian shoppers.

While I can appreciate the concerns of some Christians to not lose the origins or meaning of Christmas, I wonder if asking secular retailers to include Christmas in their sales pitch is really how Jesus would want his birth to be honored.

In different ways, each of these scenes captures much of what is at stake in this morning's scripture lessons. Alice, in her naïveté, was certainly not alone in wanting some certainty about Jesus' return. The interest in end-times or apocalyptic calculations actually predated Jesus. In the Old Testament book of Daniel we encounter the fascination with apocalyptic timetables. Evidence from the gospels, such as our reading from Matthew, and the letters of Paul, indicate that early Christians expected the imminent return of Jesus. Our passage this morning even hints that the waiting was getting long at the end of the first century. Verse 36 reminds the reader that no one knows the time or day – it doesn't help to predict.

Because of the delayed *parousia*, or second coming, Matthew used these words of Jesus to call his community to be vigilant – not to grow weary of waiting or to grow careless in its actions. During the past 2000 years the church has used the season of Advent, the four weeks before the celebration of Jesus' birth, to rekindle this vigilance. Advent, which means waiting, is a time of remembering both the waiting of the people of Israel for the birth of the Messiah and the church's anticipation of Christ's second coming and the culmination of history. The scripture texts for this time of year often reflect an understanding that Jesus came first to save and will come again to judge.

After so many years of waiting, it's not hard to understand why it's much easier to remember and celebrate the action that already happened – the birth of the baby—than to conjure up excitement for something that seems so long overdue that we can't trust its credibility. In fact, the commercialization of Christmas in our consumer culture has grown to the point that the primary waiting that many people do is to find out what's in the stockings and under the tree. Many of the gifts that people give and receive often seem to be a way to anesthetize them to the pain and suffering in our world, situations that cry out for God's intervention, that cry out for Christ's salvation and judgment. I wonder sometimes, whether Jesus even recognizes what passes as the celebration of his birth! Would he be inclined to return at Christmas?

Fortunately we aren't left with just two choices – either to be buried and anesthetized by consumption to the degree that owning 2 homes and having over \$1 million in assets isn't considered wealthy and Christians see no irony in campaigning to christen the largest shopping binge of the year as a Christian activity, or to be overly concerned with calculating end-time dates so we can tidy up the house or stand on a street-corner and predict disaster and doom. We can be a people of Advent hope and prophetic anticipation because of the example of Noah and the promise of Isaiah.

The story of Noah portrays a time perhaps like our own. The Genesis account speaks of great evil. The Matthew version suggests frivolity and mindless consumption. It's not hard to imagine that the evil was related to the fact that some people were living frivolous lives at the expense of others, perhaps on the backs of others. The system was no doubt broken and Noah, who probably had the means to join in the fun side of life, chose instead to listen to God and follow a path of symbolic

renouncement. He built a boat in the middle of a plain. His peers probably derided him not just for such a silly undertaking but for doing his own hard work and not forcing others into labor. They couldn't begin to imagine the vision he had for a different kind of world.

Isaiah's setting, in contrast, is during a time of exile and desolation. Having been overrun by foreign powers and crumbling from within, the people of Israel had little reason for hope. Ah, but NO! When people are truly destitute, hope is the only place to turn. The prophetic vision, in Isaiah 2, is one in which God's people will return home and be joined by peoples from all corners of the earth. It is one in which God's justice and arbitration among the nations and peoples results in the conversion of armaments into agricultural tools and the cessation of war. Isn't this exactly what we long for?

We live in a time of Noah and of Isaiah. Our country might be likened to the land of Noah. We possess abundant wealth, yet many of our systems are broken or crumbling – healthcare, agriculture, transportation and infrastructure. The disparities between the super rich and the poor and homeless keep increasing.

Much of the rest of the world lives in the desolation of Isaiah's time. Of the 6.6 billion inhabitants on earth, the World Bank estimates that over 1 billion live on less than \$1/day and nearly 3 billion live on less than \$2/day. An estimated 19 million people die each year from hunger and poverty-related diseases. While conditions in some parts of the world, like South Asia, have improved in recent years, other areas, like sub-Saharan Africa, have gotten worse. People in those settings long for God's intervention, for justice and judgment.

With Noah and Isaiah we can live against the tide, building sustainable realities and envisioning a world at peace. And we do. A number of us work in small-scale agriculture, plant gardens, and buy food through Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs) and local farmers markets, that rely on fewer chemical inputs and energy for cross-country transportation. Many of our families have chosen small homes and juggle work and school schedules in order to nurture their children. Many work in the service of and in collaboration with those who live on the margins of society. A number of us walk, ride bikes, and use public transportation. We contribute to the international peace-making and service work of Mennonite Central Committee through our Ten Thousand Villages store and the MCC Relief Sale. Those who have financial resources share generously; those with the gift of time volunteer.

Can we do more? Always! I have heard some of you dream about finding ways to bring more nutritional food to our food shelf programs and to low income folks in the city. Others of you dream of increasing our networks of support within our church. But whatever we do, let us not grow tired of waiting. Let us not grow tired of remembering those in our world who long deeply for God's intervention. Let us join in praying for the fires of God's justice to burn ... for God to wipe away all tears ... for the dawn to draw near... for the world to turn.

Joetta Schlabach