

A Time of Hope

On the calendar, it's rolled around once again. A popular song calls this *the most wonderful time of the year*. Surely, this is a season of the year when time itself is on our minds. There seems to be only a limited amount of it. And certain things are supposed to happen at certain times. After all, we have our traditions.

So it's a busy time. There are gatherings to plan. Homes to decorate. Trees to trim. Cards to write and mail. Gifts to wrap. Goodies to bake. Travel plans to make. Our holiday "To Do" lists seem endless. How many tasks can we cross off those "To Do" lists each day? After all, we have our schedules.

And even if we didn't, this market-driven society has a schedule *for* us. We're urged, each year, to start buying even earlier than we did the year before. Retailers start playing holiday songs early for the purpose of getting us in the mood to spend. For at least a month now, a seemingly unending procession of advertisers has been showing us glittering

images and telling us how we too can achieve perfect holidays —if we'll just keep on spending. Especially during and beyond the high holy days of the consumer culture: Black Friday and Cyber Monday. This is the Sunday between those two days—the Sunday after Thanksgiving.

One year, well *before* Thanksgiving, someone on TV started talking about how you could get *the best gift of all*. For just a few seconds, I envisioned a baby in a manger. But then, the speaker informed me that *the best gift of all* was available at a local car dealership. And that I needed to hurry up and get there!

During this season, does it ever feel as though the world's time is shrinking, contracting, closing in on you? So many scurry through their days like hamsters on wheels, frantically trying to accomplish as much as humanly possible in the shortest amount of time. For so many, this is a time of tension and stress.

But remember when you were a kid? Didn't the weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas seem to take *forever* to pass by? Could that be how the expression "slow as

Christmas” got started? In a book by Charles Schulz, one of the *Peanuts* characters observes that this season “is a time of waiting and waiting and waiting and waiting.”

It’s not until we grow up and become immersed in all the holiday busy-ness that these weeks start rushing by us, and we begin racing to keep pace with the world’s ticking clock. We race to keep pace with the world’s time, with *chronos* time.

But it seems to me that children are more attuned to another dimension of time: *kairos* time. The time into which the church invites us. A special kind of time. A pregnant-with-possibility kind of time. God’s appointed time. Do you think that perhaps children are better equipped than we grown-ups to experience a holy Advent?

Today marks the beginning of Advent. The word *advent* means a coming, an arrival. Of something *awaited*. Advent is a time of waiting. And in that waiting is hope. Out of waiting springs hope. Waiting’s natural companion is hope. Waiting is a time of hope.

In the waiting, in the stillness, in the gathering darkness of Advent days, if you listen very carefully, you may hear a

voice. Less strident, less shrill than the incessant barrage of other voices. Could this be a small voice? Even a whispering voice? This morning, could you be hearing this voice in the words of Isaiah—inviting you to live in hope?

I think we *are* hearing that voice this morning. I think we *can* live in hope!

We live in hope because the images in Isaiah's prophecy are images of reality. The world holds before our eyes a fantasy—a vision that sparkles and dazzles. A vision that seduces and beckons. A transitory vision. A fleeting vision. But Isaiah directs our focus to an alternative vision. A diametrically different vision! An eternal vision. A vision of reality. A vision of truth. And in the truth of this reality is hope.

We live in hope because God's word assures us that these things will take place. In days to come. Not at the end of time. But in real time. *In the midst of the present*, one interpreter affirms. We don't know when. We don't know whether they will be in this life. But one thing we do know—they're *going* to happen!

We live in hope because there will be a time when the peoples of this world—the nations of this earth—will come together. There will be a time when our God will settle things between us. There will be a time when our God will make things right between us. Once and for all. So there will no longer be any reason for conflict. Nor any reason to train for battle. Aggression will come to an end. Violence and brutality will be no more. For war is *so* not the will of this God who speaks through the prophet!

We live in hope because, as Isaiah wants to be sure you know, the time is coming when every weapon of death will be hammered out. And transformed into a farming tool. Into a tool for growing food. Swords become shovels. Spears become hoes. In the words of Neal Plantinga, tanks become tractors. Missile silos become grain silos.

That which was wielded to *destroy* life will be used to *sustain* life. To plow and to plant. To cultivate and to harvest. To raise crops. To feed hungry people. To nourish all of earth's creatures.

We live in hope because the time is coming when we human creatures will leave the paths of self-absorption and self-sufficiency and self-gratification. The time is coming when we'll leave behind the pathways of self-will, the pathways of our own design. The time is coming when we'll ask that our feet be guided onto on the path of wholeness and peace—the peace of which the psalmist sings—in accordance with God's loving intention and God's desire that we become all that we have been created to be.

And as we walk this path, we live in hope because light is coming. The apostle tells us that *the night is far gone and the day is near*. It's still dark. The world is still dark. But not for long! This day, we light one candle. One candle, shedding its light, casting light into the darkness. One glowing light. One growing light. Paul encourages you and me to put on this light, to put on the armor of light. To put on the light of Christ, given to show us the way along the path that leads home to God.

Isn't home where we yearn to be at this time of year? At this time of hope?

This *is* a time of hope because something extraordinary is about to happen. And, as Frederick Buechner puts it, “The extraordinary thing that is about to happen is matched only by the extraordinary moment just *before* it happens. Advent is the name of that moment.”

For Advent anticipates the *momentous*. Advent puts us on tiptoe. Eager! Expectant! Awaiting not just one coming, but two. *Two* advents of this most extraordinary One, who comes to us as the Word made flesh, and who will come again. We don't know when that will happen. The day and the hour of his coming are not ours to know. What we *do* know is that we live in the time between Christ's incarnation and his promised return to earth. We live in the time between his first advent and his second. We live in the time between the times. We live in a time of hope!

We live in hope because, in the fullness of time, God has given the gift of God's self in Jesus, born in Bethlehem.

We live in hope because, once again, God will give the gift of God's self in the Advent of the Christ, who will come again in glory. The Christ, who will return in God's own

perfect time, bringing salvation that's nearer to you now than when you first believed.

And we live in a time of hope because, not only in the past, and not only in the future, but *this very day*, God is giving you the gift of God's self in Christ Jesus. Encountering you in Word and Spirit. Showing you all that now becomes possible through radically transformed life in him. Surprising you and delighting you. Pouring out on you the overflowing grace of this One who is with you always.

In this season of Advent, beloved, invite this One into your heart. In this time, and for all time, be filled with the hope that is in him.

For these precious gifts of God's self are the best gifts of all!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.