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Are We Prepared this Advent?

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Malachi 3:1-4; Isaiah 11:1-10; Luke 3:1-6

“The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together.”

The language used by the prophet Isaiah imagines an impossible world, a world turned upside down by the dawn of a new age.

“The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.” (Isaiah 11:6-7)

It's difficult to know exactly what the seer has in mind, other than his confidence that a time will come when the animosities and hostilities that currently abound will be no more. Using the image of predator and prey relaxing together and sharing a meal, Isaiah jolts us out of complacency with the realities of our time. He wants us to think that things can, and will, change.

The wolf shall live with the lamb.

Many of us have given up on reaching anything like the community the prophet proposes in his other-worldly creation. But Isaiah seems to be asking us to consider...*if I can see it happening among the animals, why can't you see it happening among yourselves?*

In fact, the prophet suggests as much when he adds children into the mix. He imagines the transformed animals being led by a little child. He sees small children playing unafraid in the midst of venomous snakes:

“The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den.”
(Isaiah 11:8)

What kind of creation is it where the creatures have learned to live in harmony with one another? What kind of world is it where fear would not rule the day, and life would not be defined by rancor and enmity?

That’s the world of Advent, a world in which the coming of a child will mark a cosmic shift. Love will no longer be an abstract possibility, but instead will put on clothes that look an awful lot like ours.

Remember Harry Potter's invisibility cloak? It saved him from many a tight spot. He would put it on and no one could see him, but he could see them.

Sometimes it feels as if we get up each morning in our world and put on a different cloak altogether, a cloak of fear, the opposite of the invisibility cloak. People can still see us, but we can't see them. Instead, we see images that frighten us, or stereotypes that terrify us. We don't see people for who they are, but, rather, for what our anxieties imagine they might be.

We wear the cloak of fear to school and to work and out on the street and, perhaps, even to church. It keeps us always afraid, perpetually prejudging others wherever we go. If we keep it on too long, it begins to harden our hearts, making it more difficult to change.

In the world of Advent we shake off the cloak of fear, because life is lived by different rules in this season. In anticipation of a new day dawning, everything begins to change, including us. Hostility has ceased. Fear is gone. Death is no more. The desert flourishes and the dry places flow with cool, clear water.

Isaiah is convinced of it.

He may not ever see that world, but in the imagination of his heart he already lives in it. *We* may never see it either, but Advent invites us to live as if the new day were dawning here and now.

In the words of the old Advent hymn:

“Make you straight what long was crooked, make the rougher places plain.

Let your hearts be true and humble, as befits God’s holy reign,

For the glory of the Lord now o’er the earth is shed abroad, and all flesh shall see the token that God’s word is never broken.”

(Comfort, Comfort, Ye, My People; Johannes Olearius, 1671; third stanza)

The hymn-writer borrows from Isaiah, the prophet of Advent, who – against all odds – conjures up a completely changed landscape, and then climbs into it. He inhabits that new world, a place unlike the one in which we now live.

To help us see it, once again he turns to the language of creation, only this time it’s not the animals, but the topography of the earth. The prophet describes mountains and hills brought low, and crooked, rough places made straight and smooth.

In the days just before Jesus comes onto the scene – the Advent of that time – Luke puts Isaiah’s words into the mouth of John the Baptizer. He connects the events in Bethlehem with the prophetic imagination of long ago, in order to prepare the people for the coming reign of God.

Are we prepared this Advent? Are we ready for the great turning of time at the birth of Mary's boy?

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”
(Isaiah 40:3-5)

It's the climax of history, the in-breaking of light for a dimly-lit world, and Luke and Isaiah and John and Mary and Ruth and Elizabeth all want us to be ready for it. Hope and promise and life itself are at stake.

Are we ready?

John the Baptizer knew what it meant to be prepared. He centered his entire ministry on it. He went around preaching that it was *time to change, time to repent*. Repentance requires turning our lives around, heading in another direction, starting over, letting the wind of the Holy Spirit gently push us away from our old selves and slide us slowly toward something new, and better.

We all have crooked and uneven places of our own making, if we look honestly at ourselves and our lives. God knows *the world* is full of them. When we repent the crooked is made straight and the rough places plain. We are *prepared* when we're willing to let the grace of God go to work in us, to smooth us over and

straighten us out. To be prepared is to be ready to change, to change ourselves and our systems.

“The past is finished and gone,” we say every week in worship after praying our repentance. What if Advent were the time that really happened?

In his poem *Messiah (Christmas Portions)*, Mark Doty describes what takes place when a community choral society performs Handel’s *Messiah*. It’s an unexpected enactment of Advent one evening in the small town’s Methodist church.

Doty sets the context of the poem:

“The day of the performance I arrived at the church just as an unbelievably beautiful sunset was occurring overhead. It seemed ironic to leave that perfectly accomplished sunset behind and enter the chapel for a doubtful human achievement.”

The singers, he says, are locals everyone knows...“the friendly bearded clerk from the post office...altos from the A&P, soprano from the T-shirt shop...”

But the poet, like the shepherds of old, is in for a surprise.

Silence in the hall,
anticipatory, as if we’re all

about to open a gift we're not sure
we'll like;

how could they
compete with sunset's burnished
oratorio? Thoughts which vanish,
when the violins begin.

Who'd have thought
they'd be so good? *Every valley,*
proclaims the solo tenor,
(a sleek blonde

I've seen somewhere before
— the liquor store?) *shall be exalted,*
and in his handsome mouth the word
is lifted and opened

into more syllables
than we could count, central *ah*
dilated in a baroque melisma,
liquefied; the pour

of voice seems
to *make* the unplanned landscape
the text predicts the Lord
will heighten and tame.

This music
demonstrates what it claims:
glory shall be revealed. If art's
acceptable evidence,

mustn't what lies
behind the world be at least
as beautiful as the human voice?"

In Advent, with Isaiah and John and the singers in the choir and hope in our hearts we draw back the quotidian curtain to see *what lies behind the world. And it is, indeed, beautiful.*

The poet continues...

"Aren't we enlarged
by the scale of what we're able
to desire? Everything,
the choir insists,

might flame;
inside these wrappings
burns another, brighter life,
quicken, now,

by song: hear how
it cascades, in overlapping,
lapidary waves of praise? Still time.
Still time to change."

(Bill Moyers, *Fooling with Words* [Wm. Morrow & Co., New York; 1999], p. 48-52)

Aren't we enlarged by the scale of what we're able to desire? Isn't that true of this season? And isn't it true that the basic message of Advent is that there's still time, still time to change?

That message compels the prophet to his song of preparation, and urges John to make ready the way of the Lord. There's still time, still time to change.

*Time for the wolf to learn to live with the lamb,
time for the leopard to learn to lie down with the kid,
time to make the rough places smooth.*

Still time. Still time for us to prepare for the change that will soon come.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.