Advent 1: Hoping For and Working Toward a Better Future

Advent feature what have sometimes been characterized as “end times” teachings of Jesus. If that term knots your stomach, I think I know why: it’s the cultural deposit of a 20th Century British/ American doctrinal novelty called “dispensationalism” Popularized in the Left Behind movies, starring Nicholas Cage. Based on 12 books in series with same name, which sold 65 million copies.

A violent vision: In Glorious Appearing (11)) Jesus merely speaks and bodies of his enemies are ripped open, forcing the Christians to drive carefully to avoid "hitting splayed and filleted bodies of men and women and horses." Many scholars denounce.....

In this view, Jesus predicted very specific things about literal end of space-time universe. In fact, the sayings of Jesus in this category (featured in Advent) refer to an impending crisis in Jerusalem—destruction of Temple—something that began in 70 AD when the first of 3 Jewish revolts were crushed by Rome, and Jerusalem left in ashes. Not end of the world, but end of their world

This view ignores the historical context of Jesus teachings and the context of the Hebrew prophets that he quotes in these sayings.

Today we’re looking at Isaiah 2: 1-5: Isaiah is writing 7 centuries before the time of Jesus. Israel’s story has had six major eras. Isaiah is writing in the last of these six.

1. Creation and Early Founders (Genesis)
2. Exodus: Israel in Egyptian exile-slavery followed by freedom march and wilderness wanderings under Moses
3. Entering Promised Land under Joshua
4. Golden Era of King David
5. Israel Adopts Trappings of Empire under Solomon
6. Period of Decline/Civil War/Exile

“The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem” (Is. 2: 1)

This preface reveals Israel’s sad condition. Not a word for the 12 tribes of Israel. That federation dissolved by civil war, then the 10 northern tribes have been crushed & dispersed into Assyrian exile, never to return with ethnic identity intact. Judah alone remains with tiny tribe, Benjamin, in South, near Jerusalem. Term, “Jews” or “Judaism” is derived from this tribe. Beginning of Jewish era.

Isaiah is writing in this decline-exile period. Prophets for those left behind from Assyrian exile are battling the longing to return to Empire days of Solomon. They see Israel’s desire to
“Make Israel Great Again” as a gross perversion of her call. Israel’s greatness is not to be found in a return to the bygone glory days of Solomon’s Empire Ambitions. Her strength is in her nearness to YHWH, which is manifest in vulnerability, concern for poor, faithful love.

In a time of social distress, it’s good to catch a vision of a better future. But the content of this vision also matters. Lots of visions presented when a society is in distress. As well we know.

Best visions are not a rehash on some bygone glory days. Best ones are like every baby ever born, a never-been-before.

This is Isaiah’s alternative to “Make Israel Great Again” by returning to Solomon’s Empire. It’s a vision worth longing for and working toward. READ Isaiah 2: 1-5

First, it’s a vision of crushing oppression ended.

We often misread texts like this because we are citizens of a world Empire and we don’t need no exalting like this. We are 4.4% of global population but we use 25% of global resources.

Israel is a shell of her former self; 10 of 12 tribes wiped out. Only Judah/Benjamin remain under threat of Assyrian conquest. The experience of national devastation would be similar to Syria today.

This language—“the mountain of the Lord’s house established as the highest of mountains”—is not literal. It’s a vision of a crushed and oppressed people rising to a place of dignity and honor after being stripped of all human dignity thru brutal violence.

Visions like this are given by God to empower oppressed people. The I have a Dream speech was first given in Detroit at Cobo Hall to largest Civil Rights Demonstration (125K) ever. Protesting segregation in South and inequality in wages/housing in North, when Detroit had a mostly white and racist police force. Then in DC to a rally twice size for economic justice for African Americans.

Visions like this are for the oppressed. They don’t work as a commencement address at University of Michigan.

The message for the rest of us is to see how God sides with the oppressed so we can understand that our blessed future is connected to our standing with them, not over them.

Second, it’s a vision of the end of sacrifice, which is the end of scapegoating.
“Mountain of the Lord’s house” is reference to Temple in Jerusalem, highest elevation (far from a mountain). But there’s no mention at all of the main business of the temple: sacrifice.

You’d expect: “all nations shall stream to it” to be followed by “to offer sacrifices to the God of Jacob.” Instead, “Come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord...that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his path...For out of Zion shall go for instruction and the world of the Lord from Jerusalem”

Isaiah is a key player in project to unmask scapegoat mechanism. We humans constrain our violence by projecting our group anxiety on a single individual or minority group. We believe false accusations against them and turn on them to stigmatize, exclude or kill them. This temporarily relieves our many rivalries and brings a period of peace, but it’s a false peace.

This mechanism depends on everyone believing a lie: that the scapegoated person/group is guilty of the accusations made against them. In antiquity, people bought it. No stories in which the person killed to bring peace is innocent...Except in the Hebrew Scriptures where the innocence of such victims is stressed.

Animal sacrifice is something God allowed to regulate this unconscious tendency, divert it from human sacrifice to animal. Isaiah anticipates a time when God will bring all sacrifice to an end by exposing the scapegoat mechanism through a Suffering Servant, an innocent victim vindicated by God. (Servant Songs)

Along the way, Isaiah decries the need for any sacrificial victims:  
I detest the bulls on your altars! I desire mercy not sacrifice! 
Jesus, who comes to fulfill this vision, repeats this saying, “Go see what is meant by “I desire mercy not sacrifice”

This is a vision of God’s people finally freed from their addiction to sacrificial violence to contain their violent ways.

Third, it’s a vision of radical disarmament.

“They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more”

Normally nations are disarmed only by their conquerors: Japan and German were disarmed by brutal acts of war:
Fire-bombing of Dresden killed 25K civilians in one night.
Hiroshima - Nagasaki far exceeded that.
But Isaiah sees a world in which violence plays no role, not even in restraining greater violence.

This is why Jesus predicted a period of intensifying conflicts after the scapegoat mechanism is unmasked by his death and rising. In the ancient world, everyone thought the person whose death brought peace to a community in conflict was guilty. The scape-goat mechanism doesn’t work if enough people realize that the excluded person or group is innocent of the accusations being hurled against it by the ringleaders of the mob, the demagogues.

The distress of the “end times” isn’t caused by divine violence. It’s caused by increasing tension in human societies that don’t have the ancient scapegoat mechanism to fall back on.

The Sermon on the Mount is a survival manual for societies that can no longer restrain violence effectively thru the scapegoat mechanism. It calls for voluntary disarmament at all levels: no judging, no contempt, turn other cheek, love your enemies, forgive those who harm us. Jesus calls this the narrow path that leads to life compared with the wide path that leads to destruction. It’s commentary on Isaiah’s “neither shall they learn war any more”

MLK quoted the verse in Isaiah about the voluntary renunciation of violence in his last Sunday sermon before being assassinated, delivered at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. The sermon was titled “Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution”: It is no longer a choice, my friends, between violence and nonviolence. It is either nonviolence or nonexistence…. I believe today that there is a need for all people of good will to come with a massive act of conscience and say in the words of the old Negro spiritual, “We ain’t gonna study war no more.”

Fourth, there’s an advance unveiling of the Spirit as the opposite of accusation.

Stick with me. The NT has one new term to refer to the bad spirit and another new term to refer to the good spirit and they are related to each other. The new term for bad spirit is “the satan” which means “the accuser.” The new term good spirit is “the paraclete” a judicial term that means “advocate for the defense”

This revelation changes our vision of God. It’s natural to think of God as the accuser. That’s how many of us think of God and it’s why we keep our distance. But in NT, accusation is the work of the bad spirit, “the satan.” And the good spirit, God’s Spirit, is the opposite of accusation: defense advocate.

Where is the hint of this in Isaiah? “He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples”
You’re in an ugly business dispute. You remand your case to binding arbitration. When you meet with the arbitrator you get the impression that she is not on your side. This is very bad news. But what if it’s just the opposite? The arbitrator seems to be for you, not against you? That’s good news!

That’s the sense of **“He shall arbitrate for many peoples.”** The visions of Isaiah suggest a great diplomatic summit in Jerusalem (a holy city for 3 major world religions) but, tellingly, it’s not a victory for one nation at the expense of the others. **He shall arbitrate for many peoples.**

We’ve entered an era rising nationalist ideologies—at least in Europe and now the U.S. Nationalism feels good, but it amounts to a blinding group-think. Nationalism is a symptom of rivalry, which is the mark of the realm of darkness, not the realm of God.

If we’re under the influence of the good Spirit, named by the Messiah, the Advocate, we will be suspicious of the voices of accusation, named by the Messiah, the satan.

**This will make us conscientious objectors to every attempt to scapegoat others.**

We will be moved instead by Isaiah’s vision of a better future. This is the vision we will hope in and work toward. (And unless we’re working toward it, it’s an empty vision, a diversion from reality.)

We will look for opportunities to disarm ourselves, to lay down our weapons. Being right will mean less to us, not more. Winning the argument will lose its luster. Our victories at the expense of others, will feel hollow to us.

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QUIET REFLECTION

I’m going to read it slowly in 3 sections. Before each section, I’ll invite you to use your imagination to picture this applying to your own situation.

In this first section, let the words of the prophet apply to any ways that you can identify with Israel under oppression. You might reflect on any way that you have been dishonored by others, perhaps scapegoated for some difference. In your family, in society.

If there’s nothing like that in your life, imagine these words applying someone you know who has felt this in their life.

As you let the words wash over you, picture that oppression being lifted, the people who are ignorantly oppressing you, receiving instruction to the contrary from God and changing their ways....
In days to come
   the mountain of the LORD’s house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
   and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.
   Many peoples shall come and say,
‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
   to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
   and that we may walk in his paths.’
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
   and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
He shall judge between the nations,
   And shall arbitrate for many peoples.

Sit for a little while longer.... Picture a God who will arbitrate for you, not against you and for anyone oppressed.
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In this next section, let the Spirit show you a part of your life where you could voluntarily disarm yourself.... move from a posture of fighting to a posture of building up

   they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
       and their spears into pruning-hooks;
   nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
       neither shall they learn war any more.

Now sit with that for a little while...
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In this final section invite the Spirit who advocates for people rather than accusing them, that is to say, “the light of the Lord”

O house of Jacob,
   come, let us walk
       in the light of the LORD!

Sit with that for a little while longer