

**Walking in the Light**  
Isaiah 2: 1-5 & Romans 13: 11-14

*First Sunday of Advent/ 27<sup>th</sup> November 2022*

*Isaiah holds out a vision for us.* That's what prophets do. They call us to set our sights on things that matter, that really matter, upon God's claim on our lives, and then they invite—or force—us to align our thoughts and passions and order our steps in the direction of that vision.

*Isaiah holds out a vision for us.* “In days to come, the mountain of Yahweh's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains; and shall be raised above the hills” (Isaiah 2:2). Isaiah is speaking of Jerusalem, the city of Yahweh's peace, Yahweh's *shalom*. The City of Yahweh will be the place above every place, the focal point of the world. “Come let us go up to the mountain of Yahweh, to the house of the God of Jacob” (Isaiah 2:3). Why? So that Yahweh might teach us the way.

*Isaiah holds out a vision for us.* God's house will be a place of instruction, of learning, where we discover the ways of God, a place where God's people are trained to walk in those ways. “For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem” (Isaiah 2:3). The ways of God shall be known among the nations and *followed* by the nations. The God of Jerusalem is the God of peace, and, as we know, we have much to learn about peace. Yes, there was a time for war in Israel's long and bloody history. Yes, Yahweh comes across as a warrior God in the Hebrew scriptures. But here, at least in this text, we have a different witness and vision. Yahweh's people will be arbiters of peace, working for peace. “They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” (Isaiah 2:4). In God's vision, instruments of death and destruction will be transformed and used to plant fields whose yield will feed God's people, not destroy them.

*Isaiah holds out a vision and invites us to walk toward it, led by the light of Yahweh.*

And the vision that Isaiah held out for Jacob sharply contrasts with their day-to-day reality. Isaiah knew that all was not well with their souls. Yes, God's vision is clear. God's purposes are clear. But Jacob, “you have forsaken the ways of your people, O house of Jacob” (Isaiah 2:6). How? They have been tempted by sorcery and wealth, drawn away by silver and gold, the tinsel trappings of other gods. As we read later in Isaiah 2, “Their land is filled with idols; they bow down to the work of their hands, to what their own fingers have made” (Is. 2:8).

Idolatry has always been a subject of grave concern within Judaism. That's because the writers of the Hebrew scriptures knew, which we tend to forget, that *you become what you worship, so you better be clear about the object of your devotion, passion, and obsessions*. That thing or person or idea you invest so much authority and identity in and to which you give value better be worthy of such devotion because you will become like it. The reformer John Calvin (1509-1564) was right when he said the human mind is a factory of idols. We are adept at making idols, either with our own hands or constructing them with our thoughts, investing them with considerable power and value, which we then worship, forgetting we were their makers.

This is why we must strive to be conscious of those idols that tempt and pull us away from God's vision and view of reality. The approaching holidays are full of idols, and we have to be cunning as wolves. The gods of retail are legion these days. Their followers partake of bizarre rituals they call "Black Friday" and hold the odd belief that Thanksgiving marks the start of "the Christmas Season." Where do they get these ridiculous ideas?

We who begin our walk through Advent this morning know a different story, hold to an alternate view of reality, we see things differently. We follow a different light.

*Advent calls us to be different.* We start this season from a different perspective and, hopefully, end on December 25 or January 6 in a very different place. Advent sends us down "the road less traveled"—and, as Robert Frost (1874-1963) knew, "that [makes] all the difference."<sup>1</sup>

This first Sunday of Advent, we begin a journey together. Not Joseph and Mary's journey to Bethlehem. Not the Magi's journey searching for a star. While their stories are never far from us this time of year, I invite you to consider your journey toward the place of birth, your birth or rebirth, maybe even God's journey toward you. Throughout scripture, God is always on the move—in the wilderness, in the promised land, sending people here, sending people there, sending God's Son, the Son sending disciples, the Spirit of God sending the church. The sending and the journey are central to our experience of God. It's even implied here in Isaiah 2. Isaiah gives us a vision, and then we're invited to walk in the way of the Lord (Isaiah 2:5). We're given a vision and then a path and called forward into the future.

God never leaves us where God finds us. Yes, God accepts us as we are but never leaves us there. God's acceptance includes a *summons*—which means the direction of our lives will inevitably change. In our life in Christ, movement is constant, and change and growth are constant. God the teacher has so much to teach us, for instruction still flows from God's dwelling place. There's still much for us to learn about what it means to love and be loved; there's still much to discover about what it means to forgive and to be forgiven, to receive peace, to be makers of peace. The Spirit of Christ is forever nudging us forward, challenging us, comforting us, yes, but also prodding us so that we might grow and grow up into mature people in Christ.

Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (1878-1965) once said, "All journeys have secret destinations of which the traveler is unaware." He touches upon the fearful side of any journey. Whether it's a trip to the heart of Africa, driving on the beltway, or exploring the depths of one's heart, we know there's anxiety associated with journeys, going someplace new and different. We're all creatures of habit. We like our well-worn paths, the familiar surroundings, and the things we know. But sometimes, we must leave home to discover where the Spirit is sending us, to arrive at the place of birth, the place of hope. Sometimes the journey to Bethlehem—to the place of birth—requires leaving home and going through new, maybe even scary, terrain. For some, we cannot discover birth or renewal unless we leave home, whether this means literally leaving home or taking leave internally through an adventure of the heart.

But we so often prefer the familiar. An old Chinese proverb says, “Unless we change the direction we are headed, we might end up where we are going.” So, then, what are we missing if we never leave home? What are we missing going down the same old path? How many of us drive the same road to work every morning and the same way home? How many of us take the same route to church and back each Sunday, never venturing “home by another way” (cf. Mt. 2:12)?

Most of us have been through Advent before. We have heard the stories, listened to these texts, and may have sung “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” more times than we wish. What will make this year different? What if you took a different route to Christmas this year? What if you discovered a new way to enter the hope of Advent and the mystery of the Incarnation? Where will this journey take you, take us, this year?

*I firmly believe that the Spirit of the Living God is always on the move and wants to lead us to a new place—to the place of birth, to the place of hope, the place of peace, the place of joy, the place of love, the place of healing, the place of resurrection!* It’s all part of God’s grace. The Lord takes us from where we are and, by grace, shows us where we need to go. It’s the journey of discovering what it means to be human, what it means to be alive, what it means to serve and give—realizing the very purpose of our lives. The Italian Jungian psychoanalyst [Aldo Carotenuto](#) (1933-2005) once wrote, “Although we cannot know why we were brought into this world, we can be sure that it was not just to stand there gazing off into space.”<sup>2</sup>

What if the Lord is summoning you on a different kind of journey this Advent? What if you’re on the road toward birth? What if God is trying to birth something new in you, with you, through you? Where are you being led? God’s Spirit summons us to travel, to move, to journey down new paths.

And traveling is difficult, especially when it’s dark. For most of human history, traveling at night was dangerous. We need light to see where we are going. Today, we have so much light in lives, both natural and artificial, surrounded by light pollution, and we still don’t know where we’re going. We think we have so much light and are so enlightened, yet we’re unable to see just how dark the world and people can be—although the tragic shootings this past week have reminded us how dark the world is. We wake for a time and remember, but then we go back to sleep. The residents of Kyiv know how dark the world can be. The world is very dark for many. They yearn for light, even if only for a flicker of light. For many, the journey of faith has already taken them into dark realms, into shadow, and they long for light.

Light is required for the journey—*God’s light*. In this season of deep darkness that yearns for something more, let us walk in God’s light, leading us to the place where something new might be born (again) in us. Let us walk in the light of God—stay close to the Lord. In prayer, worship, and service. *Stay close to the light, without fearing or avoiding the darkness.*

Living for more than a year along Tinker Creek in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, writer Annie Dillard learned an important truth. She says, “I cannot cause the light; the most I can do is try to put myself in the path of its beam.”<sup>3</sup>

What is the vision that God is holding out for you? With grace and with courage, let us step out and walk in the light of the Lord.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Frost, "The Road Not Taken," *Mountain Interval* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1920).

<sup>2</sup> Aldo Carotenuto, *To Love To Betray: Life as Betrayal*, Joan Tambureno, trans. (Wilmette, IL: Chiron Publications, 1996), 32.

<sup>3</sup> Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 33.