

Are We There Yet?

Year A, First Sunday of Advent – Isaiah 2:1-6

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, December 1, 2013

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

The junior members of the Martindale family has some games we used to play to help pass the time when traveling from one place to another in our Ford LTD Country Squire station wagon, that precursor to the SUV that I've told you about before. You remember the LTD, ten seats and so long that I think my youngest brothers in the back had their own zip code. With five of us kids, we really *needed* all that room, and for *really* long trips, like from our home in Phoenix back to Ohio to visit family, we would even fold everything down to accommodate a full-size mattress on which we could alternate sleeping and wrestling – mostly, because Dad did not stop the car until he absolutely had to. That was the 60s, of course, before seat belts became mandatory. I'm sure we would have had a safer mini-van if someone had yet thought to invent them.

One of our games for whittling away at the time (and at Dad's sometimes severely limited patience) was the "Are we there yet?" game. Perhaps you know that game? Our version usually started out being kind of a family joke, what with having almost enough voices to imitate the Waltons ("Good night, John-boy"). It usually ended with Dad expressing that he had at last had enough of this particular pastime. Actually, it *usually* ended shortly *after* that when Dad raised his *voice* about his desire to move on.

I was reminded of those journeys last week as I was rolling down the Pennyrile Thursday afternoon to join Jenny for our Thanksgiving feast. I was sent down memory lane, of course, by the trip itself, but, as an occupational hazard of sorts, I suppose, I was also thinking that, to me, *Advent* always feels a bit like one of those long trips of my youth. As we do every year, here at the end of one cycle of the Church Year and the beginning of another, we are on a journey, all of us, a journey that leads... yes, toward the promise of Christmas, but also to... something, to... *somewhere*.

Our reading this morning from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah gives us a vision about this destination. Our journey this sacred season, the prophet reminds us, is to another way of being. Our journey, he whispers, is to peace, to those sacred places, like the Mountain of the Lord's house and like this holy place *here*, where we can learn from God the ways that *make* for peace, submitting ourselves to God whose will is peace and wholeness, not just for every *nation* – but for every human being, and specifically for you, specifically for me. Isaiah looks ahead and sees our destination as a world at peace, where "swords are beaten into plowshares, [where] spears [are] turned into pruning hooks, and [where] we learn war no more."

As I was still thinking about all that, I lost NPR in the hills south of Mad'ville, and stumbled on a station that had started playing Christmas music for the holiday weekend. I tuned in just in time to hear Bing Crosby croon one of my favorite Christmas hymns, the one based on a poem written by American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, recalling the angels' Christmas song, and recalling the prophet's destination:

I heard the bells on Christmas day
their old familiar carols play;
and wild and sweet the words repeat
of peace on earth, goodwill to men.

The prophet and the poet both write of a vision of paradise restored. They write of the world remade into what God has always wanted it to be – a world of harmony, a world of peace, a world of well-being for all creation. But they both ask as well, "Are we there yet?"

Longfellow wrote his poem, it's said, on Christmas day, 1864, shortly after hearing the news of his son's death in the madness of the war that divided brother against brother just blocks north of here. On the very eve of the *end* of that conflict, Longfellow's own troubled heart asked of the Christmas angels, "Are we there yet?" Looking around him at the waste and the want and the wandering of war, he saw that in spite of the advancement of science, in spite of the march of democracy, in spite of the progress of social reforms, his world was still so very, *very* far from the idyllic paradise envisioned by prophets and angels, and he penned:

And in despair I bowed my head:
 "There is no peace on earth," I said,
 "For *hate* is strong, and *mocks* the song
 Of peace on earth, good-will to men."

Now, a century-and-a-half of years, and way more than a few wars later, here at what *might* be the end of more than a dozen years of yet another quagmire of conflict, we are sometimes tempted to say with resignation, "That's the way it's always been – and that's the way it will always be," until "peace on earth" becomes nothing more than the punch-line of an air-headed beauty pageant joke.

Isaiah didn't think so. The prophet was not content to let his eyes rest on the war-littered landscape around him. Instead, he lifted his head above the darkness of this broken world, above the hate that's so strong that it mocks the song of peace on earth. Isaiah fixed his eyes steadily on the distant horizon, to just over the hills, to that time and to that place, when and where, with God's help, we would all walk in the light of the Lord.

Advent comes to bid us, even with all our weary cynicism, to join in the prophet's dream. Advent comes to bid us to dream that same dream. Advent comes to bid us, dear friends, to work to see the day of that dream become a reality. And there's really only one way to get from where we are to where we are going. There's really only one way to get where we *need* to be. That's to keep putting one foot in front of the other, hammering away at every sword and every spear in our own lives, until rejection is broken into acceptance, until quarreling is beaten into listening, until selfishness is pounded into sacrifice. Hammering away until *every* sword begins to look more and more like a plowshare, until every spear bends to a pruning hook, until apathy is reshaped into service, until greed is reformed into generosity, until hatred is molded into love.

"Are we there yet?" No. And, as Jesus reminds us in this morning's Gospel lesson, "About that day and hour, *no* one knows." But by God's grace, by the coming of Emmanuel, God with us, we're still on the journey. This Advent, may each moment of prayer, may each act of service, may each offering of worship, may each ringing chime, move us one step more... and one step more... and one step more toward our true destination – the coming of the Holy One into our hearts, and into our world. With the prophet let us truly believe that such a blessed destination is our birthright as children of God. With the psalmist let us look upward, every step of the journey. And with the poet, perhaps we can make our song:

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
 "God is *not* dead, nor doth he sleep;
 The wrong *shall* fail, the *right* prevail,
 With peace on earth, good-will to men."