

I

Where's it all going? What is the point of all the efforts we put in? Is it all just a party that will eventually come to an end?

Another way to ask this question is this: what kind of city do we want to live in? What's our vision of life? I'm from the New York Metropolitan area, so, of course, heaven would look like New York, except I'd have a lot more money in my pocket. It's as if they cannot get enough of life. Most people don't know that the City has beaches both rivers and ocean. There is would I live. I could relax by the water and if I needed anything it would be there in the city.

Others hate New York, of course, and never want to go there. The very things that excite me are the very things that drive them crazy. Crowds, noise, rushing around?

They'd rather be on a farm in Iowa than walking in Central Park.

In the first reading we have a section near the opening of the book of the prophet Isaiah. He is speaking to people surrounded and threatened by their national enemies, people who wanted the very destruction of Jerusalem. But Isaiah turns it around: one day, he says, people will be rushing toward Jerusalem. They will all want to live there. They will realize that living in Jerusalem means living in the city of God.

That was the message the people in Isaiah's time needed to hear. But God has a bigger message for us. God's plans for us are not a single city like Jerusalem. Nor even a great and populous city like New York. God invites us into his city, the city that shows us why we are living and what our goals in life should be like.

The opening Sunday of Advent gives us a choice: what are we living for? Do we think life is all ultimately about nothing? Or do we think our lives come to greater meaning and fulfillment? The vision God has for us is the Kingdom of God, a Kingdom where you and I live in the fullness of life and love. This is a vision, a Kingdom, which no amount of negativity can destroy.

We can live as if things didn't make sense, stuffing our bellies and getting drunk. Lots of people choose this option today. Look at the amount of addiction and self-destruction that happens on a regular basis in our world. One statistic said that one in five young adults die from the abuse of addiction. Or we can live as if every moment of our lives makes sense because we have made the greatest discovery we can make: we have discovered the immensity of God's love for us.

We often think of Advent as a time of searching, of seeking, of waiting through the dark and cold of winter. Indeed, we do seek and search every moment of our lives. But more than our searching for God, there is God's seeking us, encountering us, beholding us in infinite love, and telling us that we have a place in his life, in his city, where all of humankind can rejoice together, a Kingdom where divine love will be unconstrained in our hearts.

Christmas decorations are beginning to appear everywhere and the children are getting excited. Children love this time before Christmas because it gives them something for which to look forward. We all like to have something exciting and good for which to look forward, don't we? We enjoy expectancy. That is the great thing about the season of Advent. It is a season of expectancy. It is a season of looking forward expectantly to the celebration of the birth of the Savior. But it is even more than that. It is a time for entering into the expectancy that should be a part of the lives that Christians live every day of the year.

Our second reading is full of expectancy. Paul is telling the Romans, and us, to look forward to something that God is going to do. "... you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first became believers" (13:11). What did Paul mean by that? Some of us have a day when we realized that we have been in a relationship with Jesus since our infant baptism. But here is Paul, writing to believers and telling them that their salvation is still in the future. What did he mean by that?

One thing that Paul must have had in mind is the belief that there will be a coming "day of the Lord" when Jesus will return and all of God's loving purpose for the world will be accomplished. Paul believed that day would come during the lifetime of many of the people to whom he wrote. Obviously, that didn't happen. And yet, Paul's writings reflect the fact that there is a definite orientation toward some future fulfillment that is a part of our Christian faith. Paul believed that God is bringing in a new age of righteousness, a new day when all of God's loving purpose for us and for our world will be fulfilled and that we are living in the dawning of that new day.

That belief is reflected in what Paul wrote in Romans 8. In that pivotal chapter, he does indeed speak of salvation as something that has been given to believers. "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (8:1). "When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirits that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ ..." (8:15-17). And finally, nothing in the whole creation "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (8:39).

But in that same chapter, he speaks of a yearning for and a movement toward a future salvation, "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also ..." (8:11). And, "... we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies" (8:23). Clearly, our salvation is something that is still going on, something we can hope for and anticipate and reach out toward.

But our scripture lesson for today comes from a part of the letter in which Paul is not talking primarily about personal salvation but about the participation of the Christian community in the life of the larger community in which they lived. Also in Romans 8, Paul makes it clear that the movement toward the fulfillment of God's purpose has social dimensions. "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning together in labor pains until now ..." (8:19-22). So God is at work in the whole creation to move it toward some future salvation.

I hope that you can catch enough of a vision of what Paul was trying to show us to get excited about it. That vision can help us understand what we are doing when we celebrate the season of Advent. Here we are, over 2,000 years after the birth of Jesus, participating in

an observance that has to do with looking forward to the coming of salvation. Yes, the Savior has come and the gift of salvation has been given. But the difference that gift is meant to make, both in our lives and in our world, is something that has yet to be brought to fulfillment. That fulfillment is something that we should hope for and look forward to expectantly. And we are called to participate in the work that God is doing to bring salvation to completion

What would it mean for us to live as if we believe that God is at work in our world to bring the whole world to some kind of new and better life? For one thing, it would mean taking a much more positive attitude toward the unfolding of human history than lots of us have. Do you remember the Y2K commotion? You have probably all but forgotten it now, but it caused quite a furor when it was going on. You will remember that, as our world approached the year 2000, someone realized that, through the short-sightedness of what is supposed to be one of our most future-oriented industries, all of the world's computers were expected to go haywire as the new millennium arrived. In a computer-dependent society, we thought that was going to throw the whole world into chaos. That anxiety, together with a re-emergence of some very primitive old superstitions about the coming of a new millennium, caused lots of people to go into a tizzy. Some were preparing for the year 2000 in a way that was reminiscent of the ways in which some people prepared for nuclear war, complete with hoarded food and water and weapons to shoot your neighbors if they tried to take any of your stuff. Looking back on it, it all seems very foolish. But it caused a lot of real consternation when it was happening. You know, lots of people always look forward to the coming of the future with a similar kind of dread. It is unknown and so they think of it as threatening

But Christian people should look forward to the future with a confidence that comes from knowing that the future is in God's hands and that God will be at work for our salvation in the future as in the past.

That is not to say that the future can always be counted to bring only good things to us. As we look at the things that have happened since Y2K, we will see that some of them have been good and some have been bad. We have endured September 11. That was about as bad as it gets short of a nuclear war. And we have seen the Holy Land enveloped in a heartbreaking conflict that has given new meaning to the psalmist's admonition to "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem" (Psalm 122). We have experienced the anguish of our country's involvement in southwest Asia. But in all of these things, we can be confident that God is still at work to bring good out of evil and new life out of chaos and death -- and we can also be confident that God has some things for us to do so that we can participate in God's saving work.

We can take a similar attitude toward our own lives. When we are very young, it is easy to stay excited about the future because every new day seems to bring some new experience and some bright new possibility. At least that is true for the most fortunate young people. It was true for lots of us. But sometimes, as life goes on, things slow down. Life may seem to

stagnate into the "same old same old." The burdens and the threats of it may make us stop looking forward to the future with much happy anticipation. We may have a hard time finding any reason to get excited about the future.

But so long as we know that God is at work in our lives leading us toward the fulfillment of our best possibilities, we can know to approach each new day ready to discover what surprise we will find there. Many people have found that it works that way. When the adventure that is our youth is over, when we realize that we have climbed about as far up our career ladder as we are going, when some limitation forces us to realize that some door we had always hoped would open never will, then many have learned to stop and look around and explore other dimensions of life, to take adventures into beauty or meaning or relationship of service. Many who have done that have found God at work there; opening unexpected new vistas and possibilities to them.

When we are able to believe that God is alive and at work to save in this life and beyond it, we will soon discover that we have received the gift of expectancy -- and that can make a great big difference in our lives.

II

Someone has said, "You know it's going to be a bad day when your horoscope starts with . . . 'Are you sitting down?'"

You know it's going to be a bad day when you turn on the news and they are displaying emergency routes out of the city.

You know it's going to be a bad day when you wake up in a hospital in traction and your insurance agent tells you that your accident policy covers falling off the roof, but not hitting the ground.

You know its going to be a bad day when the news van is in the front of your house.

We might add one more: You know it's going to be a bad day when your pastor says, "Wake up! Wake Up!" and you've barely gotten settled comfortably in your pew.

But that's what St. Paul is saying to us on this first Sunday in Advent. He writes, "The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here . . ."

So no slumbering this morning. It is time for us to wake up! Our salvation is at hand. Have a friend who has a boat on the Hudson river named Pastoral Calls. If you called the parish office

on Wednesday afternoons, his secretary, Louise Greer, would politely let you know that Father was not in; he was out on Pastoral Calls. The church members understood

exactly what that meant.

This priest had several other quirks or idiosyncrasies. One of them had to do with his preaching. He seemed to know that his congregation was not always paying close attention to him each Sunday, so when he eventually got to the point of his sermon, he always would preface it by asking the question, "Are you listening?" That was the congregation's cue they knew it, and he knew it. He would then wait just long enough for them to wake up or stop making out their grocery lists or stop facebooking or stop texting to their friends to tune in to what he was saying. When he asked the question, "Are you listening?" it was time to be alert and pay attention. "Are you listening?" was his "wake up" call to his congregation. (1)

Some people read Paul's words to wake up in strictly a negative sense. "The world is going to hell on a roller coaster, folks," some are prone to say, "Wake up before it's too late." And certainly there is a time for that.

Comedian George Carlin was on Imus one time and told of growing up with an Irish father who fought a drinking problem all his life. When George grew up and found his own drinking problem, he went into detox and dried out. He came out proud as a peacock and told his father, "I've beaten the drink."

Carlin said that he never forgot his father's reply: "George boy, you're sober, and that's wonderful. But there's still the marriage and the kids and the job to deal with. The monkey may be off your back, but the circus is still in town." (2)

And that's true. Some people fight that battle every day of their lives. As one A.A. speaker put it, "If you do pick up another drink, don't worry, someone will come for you. Look for the man dressed in blue, white, or black. That will be the cop, the EMT, or the coroner."

There are many people who need a wake up call because they are engaging in self-destructive

behavior. One day we're going to wake up to the moral drift in our society concerning sexual behavior and wonder what in the world have we done to our children? What in the world have we done to our marriages? What in the world have we done to the very foundation of our society?

It is amusing to me that we point at gay people and call them a threat to marriage in this land. Friends, we heterosexuals are doing quite well destroying the institution of marriage all by ourselves. When was the last time you saw a depiction of a couple happily and wholesomely entering the state of matrimony on any of our popular television shows? It seems the model for TV and movies is that the first date is for passionate sex. What do they have to look forward to?

So was St. Paul. Listen to what he says next: "The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh."

Rome in Paul's time was not much different than America in our time. People are

people. Unless someone is sounding the alarm from time to time, society has a tendency to deteriorate to be pulled down by those forces within our own nature those weaknesses of the flesh with which all of us are familiar. Paul was warning the church at Rome not to hit the snooze button when it came to the pull of destructive pleasures. Isn't that what we do sometimes? Even with all our good intentions, we are not quite ready to face the morning with all its demands, and so we hit the snooze button. According to *USA Today*, more than a third of American adults hit the snooze button every morning an average of three times. Snooziest group? The 25- to 34-year-olds 57 percent of them hit the snooze button daily. Peppiest risers? It's the seniors. Only 10 percent of Americans over 65 regularly use their snooze button. Maybe that's because seniors have finally come to the realization of how precious time is. Certainly it is time for us to wake up and to ask ourselves what we can do to make our society a healthier and more wholesome society. A society where families are healthy and strong. A society where everyone's dignity is affirmed whether they are a part of a traditional family or not. A world where the love of Christ dwells in every heart. It's easy, as some do, to read Paul's words in a negative way, and to hear only his message to wake up to the presence of sin in our world. **But we also need to hear his summons to the presence of salvation in this world** Paul's emphasis isn't on the negative at all. It's on the coming of light into a dark world. It is on preparing the world for Christ's coming. And this is what Advent is all about.

In the Christian tradition there is not just one advent we celebrate, but three. The First Advent is the coming of Christ to earth.

The Second Advent is the birth of Christ in each one of us on earth.

The Third Advent is the final return of Christ to earth.

The liturgical calendar that marks this Sunday as the First Sunday of Advent announces the "First Advent"—the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. It is really quite fitting that during this First Advent children and adults experience the passage of this time so differently. The First Advent is the first move from "chronos" to "kairos" time. The "chronos" time of the world, the passage of days and years, seasons and centuries, is overcome and overwhelmed by the breaking in of God's presence on earth and "kairos" time. As we await the First Advent, we should not be counting out minutes, hours, or days (Advent calendars are fun, but are all about "chronos" not "kairos"). Rather we should be feeling a ground-swell of kairos expectation.

There is one kind of "alarm" clock you can buy that awakens you not with a buzz or beep. It gradually glows brighter and brighter as time passes. The change in light affects your sleep cycle and wakes you up naturally—even though true "dawn" might yet be hours away.

This First Advent brought God into this world as the infant Jesus. Since the church lives in "chronos" time we make a point of celebrating this "kairos" event in a "chronos" way---on a particular day.

The Second Advent is a far less chronologically captured moment. The Second Advent celebrates Christ's continued presence in our lives, our churches, our homes, our communities, our world. In today's text Paul alludes to this on-going presence when he declares how "our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed" (v.11). The gift of

the Holy Spirit, given to all, brings the power and presence of the divine into the everyday, each day. This presence is the impenetrable “armor of light” Paul counsels the Roman Christians to “put on.” When we “clothe” ourselves in “the Lord Jesus Christ” we wrap the Second Advent around ourselves.

I love Paul’s image of “wrapping” ourselves in this “armor” or “garment” of light. Have you ever noticed how, when a degree is conferred on someone who is entering a “profession,” there is some sort of special garment that accompanies the new designation? The garment signifies that the person wearing it is armored to fight evil in the world.

A medical doctor is garbed with a full-length white coat. It is while wearing this garment that the doctor wages war against disease and injury. The newly “robed” Ph.D. wears the colors and stripes that declare war on ignorance and challenge the scholar to a life devoted to continued learning.

A soldier, marine, police officer or fire-fighter gets to wear a uniform that battles the malevolent forces of our communities. In the same way, Christians who “clothe” themselves in Christ are “armored” for the battles of the Second Advent. Living in the overlap, the “in-between times” of the new age between “now” and “not yet,” there are real and true powers of darkness that walk among us. In this Second Advent we feel the pull of both the “now” and the “not yet:” the “now” of sales on socks and stoves, diamonds and doodads and the “not yet” where dark December nights can pulse with power and peace and purpose in our families, churches, and communities.

There is, finally, a Third Advent, that final transformation of all things and the culmination of the fullness of Christ in a new creation. This is the Advent about which we can know the least, but for which we long the most. It is for this Final or Third Advent, the Maranatha Advent that we live according to the Second Advent in the knowledge of the reality of the First Advent.

Are you living all three advents this Advent season? Are you celebrating the First Advent—the birth of Christ? Are you living the Second Advent—Christ’s birth in you? Are you praying for that Third Advent—the coming new creation, in which we are summoned not just to prepare for, but to participate in? Are you adventing---battling the forces of evil and injustice and wickedness in our world. **The key, says St. Paul, to being prepared for God’s salvation is to clothe ourselves with Christ.**

Notice what Paul says at the end of this passage: “Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.”

That is a beautiful image to me “Clothe yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Ronald Hall, a Lutheran Church pastor puts it like this: “Perhaps you can recall going out to get a Christmas tree late in the holiday season. Maybe you were too busy or too preoccupied, but the time slipped away. Finally you made it to the tree lot, but there

wasn't much left. You ended up with a scraggly looking tree that wasn't very straight, but because you refused to pay the big prices they wanted for the pretty trees, that was it. Oh, well, you thought, maybe you could hide the bare spots in the corner and make it do. When the family saw the tree everyone complained about how bad it looked.

"But then you decorated it: the strings of lights, the beautiful balls and angels and the shiny tinsel. Then all the lights were turned out and the tree lights plugged in. 'Wow!' Everyone was hushed at the transformation that had taken place. 'It's beautiful.'

"God's grace is like that," says Pastor Hall. "It picks us up off the discard heap, covers us with the robe of righteousness and presents us spotless before God, magnificent in the splendor of gifts He has given and sparkling with the light that reflects His love." That's what it means to be clothed with Christ.

"Are you listening?" I'm inviting you this Advent season to fall in love with Christ all over again. To wake up from your slumber and to clothe yourself with Christ that you might discover the joy of your salvation. Paul writes, "The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here . . ." Yes it is. Let the preparation continue.

III

Children

Did you know that Jesus Christ is coming back to earth? (Let them answer.) That's what the Bible says. It teaches us that Jesus is coming back at a certain time and that only the Father in heaven knows just when.

We know the time of almost everything we do, or want to do in the future. If I wanted to cook some eggs and make sure that they were just right, I would use this egg timer, set it for just the right time, and then wait for the timer to go off. If I want a three-minute egg, I turn the egg timer just the right number of times, and it will make sure that my eggs are perfect.

I can do the same thing with a clock. Let's suppose that I want to get up in the morning at 7:15. I set the alarm on the clock and go to sleep knowing that the alarm will go off and wake me up at 7:15.

I can also know when my favorite TV show is going to be on the air by looking at the TV schedule and finding the hour of the day that it is going to be on. I will not miss it by a minute. But, now, let's suppose that I want to know when Jesus is coming back to earth. People have waited for a long time to see Jesus again, but it has not happened. I could tell you that it is going to happen tomorrow, but I don't really know when he is coming back. You could read the Bible from cover to cover and you would not know the time that Jesus is coming back. You can ask your mom or dad or any of your friends, but as

much as they want to know themselves, they do not know. God has a reason for not telling us when he is coming back. He wants us to always be expecting him and to live like he were coming back today.

If you thought that Jesus were coming to your house to live this afternoon, would you not get ready for Jesus in a special way? Would you live a little differently if you knew that Jesus was going to meet you in your living room today? I know that you would, and it is for this reason that God is not telling us when he is coming. He is asking us to live every day like he was coming today.

You may know when you are getting up, how you like your eggs, and when your favorite TV show is on the air, but you will never know when Jesus is coming until the day and the moment he arrives.

Adult

In 1948, a World War II veteran named Earl Shaffer was the first person to hike the entire Appalachian Trail. This 2,160-mile hiking trail connects Springer Mountain, Georgia, with Mount Katahdin, Maine. It is billed as the longest hiking-only footpath in the world.

Shaffer was restless after the war and he was grieving the death of his best friend. He needed to find some peace, so he set out alone on this challenging adventure. It took him through forests and streams and over mountains. He reached Maine in about four months. His journey has inspired thousands of hikers since to try to hike the entire trail, too. Every year, about 1,500 people begin the journey; only 1 in 10 completes it.

Since 1948, Shaffer has hiked the entire trail two more times. He began his third hike of the trail at the age of seventy-nine. Why would a 79-year-old man want to hike alone through 2,000 miles of rugged forests and mountains? He says he finds inspiration in the view at the end of the journey, the view from the top of Mount Katahdin.

“Katahdin is the most beautiful,” Shaffer says. “From the top you can see everything. You can look at it from so many different ways, and it looks different every time . . . People ask me what it is to make me go off and do something like this. It’s the beauty,” [he replies]. (1)

Our Bible passage for today is from Isaiah 2, and it’s a vision of a beautiful mountain. The prophet Isaiah is called by God to pronounce God’s coming judgment on the people of Jerusalem and Judah. But Isaiah is also given a beautiful view from the top of God’s holy mountain, a vision of hope, of God’s plan to restore God’s chosen people someday, to bring peace and justice to the nations through God’s anointed one, the Messiah.

“In the last days,” he writes. What exactly is Isaiah seeing in these last days? Isaiah sees a vision of the day when God’s Messiah rules the nations of the world with peace

and justice, when people from every nation come together to eagerly worship God, learn about God and live according to God's laws. He sees a vision of people who are so motivated to be in God's presence that they look like an upward flowing stream of humanity, climbing up the mountain to reach God.

Imagine for a moment a stream of water flowing up a mountain. Impossible, you say. The laws of gravity make it nearly impossible for water to flow uphill. There are just a few instances where this is somewhat possible. Waves of the ocean can move uphill, either because they are pushed by strong winds or drawn by the moon's gravitational pull. A few earthquakes have caused rivers to temporarily reverse course. Robin Bell, a geophysics professor from Columbia University, says that massive ice sheets in the Antarctic create downward pressure on the streams underneath, causing some of those streams to flow uphill from the pressure. (2)

But it takes a powerful force of nature, like heavy ice plates or an earthquake to defy the pull of gravity and move water uphill. In the same way, it takes the powerful work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and minds to inspire us to turn from our selfish, sinful ways and seek God's ways. This is the vision of the future that Isaiah announces.

In 1941, Hitler's armies were invading the city of Leningrad. The staff of the famous Hermitage Museum worked around the clock to load priceless paintings and sculptures onto three trains and move them to a safe hiding place.

The Nazi army blockaded the city of Leningrad, with the hopes of starving the population and destroying the city's industrial and military strength. The Siege of Leningrad lasted almost 900 days. More than 1 million civilians died before the Siege finally ended.

The director of the Hermitage Museum decided to keep the beautiful building open, even though most of its artwork had been sent away. He felt that the beauty of the building would give hope and respite to the suffering citizens of Leningrad.

But bombing around the city of Leningrad soon damaged the Hermitage Museum, and snow and water got through the broken windows. The museum brought in Russian soldiers to help shovel out the snow and broken glass and mop up the water.

To thank the soldiers for their work, a museum guide named Pavel Dubchevski offered to give the soldiers a tour of the museum. What was there to see? It was a nearly empty shell of a building. But Dubchevski began walking through the rooms of the Hermitage and describing in beautiful, vivid detail each work of art that had hung on the walls. He painted word pictures of the marble statues that had graced each room. And as he described the art that had once hung there, the soldier's eyes brightened. They began to see the museum through Dubchevski's eyes. They began to see the beautiful works of art that had once been in those rooms. The beautiful works of art that would grace those rooms again once the war was over. And in the middle of war and starvation and suffering, Pavel Dubchevski gave those soldiers a vision of a future hope. (3)

This morning, let's look at the future through Isaiah's eyes. He has a vision, a beautiful, vivid word picture of what life will be like someday, in the last days, when God's people finally turn back to God. This is a good Bible passage to kick off our Advent season, the season when we prepare ourselves for Jesus' coming, for Emmanuel—God with us. Because Jesus is our second chance. Jesus is our view from the mountaintop. Jesus is our reminder from God that God has a plan to undo the damage of our sin and restore us to him. Jesus' birth is the first step in the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy more than 700 years ago. So what does Isaiah see?

Let's begin here. **Jesus the Messiah is going to heal our separation from God.**

In the first part of Isaiah's vision, he sees an undoing of the Fall, when Adam and Eve's sin built a wall of shame and death between them and God and drove them out of God's presence. Our sin separates us from God and every good thing that God supplies—love, wisdom, joy and peace. Our sin separates us from each other. Our selfishness and pride keep us from experiencing intimacy with others.

In Isaiah's vision, he sees an undoing of the Tower of Babel when the people tried to build a tower up to the heavens, and God confused their languages and scattered them to prevent them from trying to become their own gods. In the last days, Isaiah says, the nations will come together to climb the holy mountain of God. They will want God's wisdom. They will seek God's ways. And more than anything, they'll want to be in God's presence. No more separation from God. No more separation from each other. That's the first part of Isaiah's vision.

In the last book of *The Lord of the Rings* series, Sam Gamgee wakes up, thinking everything is lost. Instead he discovers all his friends around him. He sees his friend Gandalf and cries out, "Gandalf! I thought you were dead! But then I thought I was dead! Is everything sad going to come untrue? What's happened to the world?"

"'A great Shadow has departed,' says Gandalf, and then he [begins to laugh] and the sound [is] like music, or like water in a parched land . . ." (4)

Everything sad is going to come untrue. What a great vision. That's the hopeful vision Isaiah saw, the hopeful vision that will be fulfilled when Jesus the Messiah comes again someday

The second part of Isaiah's vision is that Jesus the Messiah is going to heal our separation from each other. Verses 3 and 4 in this passage read, "The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore."

In the Garden of Eden, God set forth the original design for humanity. God created Adam and Eve to live in a relationship of trust with God and with each other. When we

rejected God's ways, we also rejected the unity that was meant to strengthen and protect the human race. And what took the place of unity? Selfishness, greed, injustice, power struggles, war.

A social studies teacher had just finished teaching a unit on war and peace. "How many of you," he asked, "would say you're opposed to war?"

Of course, all hands went up. The teacher asked, "Who'll give us a reason for being opposed to war?"

A boy in the back of the room raised his hand.

"I hate war," the boy said, "because wars make history, and I hate history."

Well, maybe that's not the best reason for hating war—just because you hate history. The reason we should hate war is that it is not part of God's original plan for His world. There have been times when war was essential to protect humans or preserve freedoms. But war is still a rebellion against God's original plan for humanity. And the

prophet Isaiah makes it clear that when humanity is restored to God, we will no longer desire war. We will turn our weapons into instruments of peace.

Robert Capa was a famous photojournalist who specialized in war photos. He risked his life on the front lines of battle, and his photos of the Spanish Civil war and World War II are legendary. Tragically he was killed by a landmine while on assignment in Vietnam in 1954. Robert Capa used to joke that someday his business card would read like this: Robert Capa, War Photographer—Unemployed. (5)

He was right. Someday, all who write about war and profit from war and suffer from war will be unemployed. When Jesus comes a second time, when he comes as the Messiah, the Anointed One of God, he will restore the original design of creation. Jesus will restore our peace with God and peace with each other. And all the selfish, sinful impulses that compel us to turn against one another will be transformed by God's love.

An event of some significance took place in Wauconda, Illinois, a small town with a population of 6,500. For the past 45 years the town had placed two large illuminated crosses on the city water towers during the Christmas season. Then the town council received a threat. Someone was going to sue the city if the crosses were erected in the coming Christmas season, based on the separation of church and state. The town council grudgingly took them down.

But that's when the citizens of Wauconda took matters into their own hands. They didn't counter-sue. Nor did they organize angry protests. Here's what they did. They decided to honor the missing crosses by placing lighted reminders of Christ on their own property. All over the community, the citizens of Wauconda put up lighted crosses and nativity stars and manger scenes and trees draped in lights. They put up so many lights that you could see Wauconda from the interstate freeway! Wauconda looked like an

entirely different town. All night it was as bright as day because the people decided to turn on the lights of Christmas. (6)

What is the first thing God created in this world? Light. What is the last thing that will indicate the presence of God is among us? According to the book of Revelation it is light.

The Advent season is our chance to remember, to celebrate, to announce to the world that the Messiah has come and that we have been called to walk in the light of the Lord. And as we walk in God's light, we will choose justice and peace because through Jesus we have been restored to God and restored to one another. For these next four weeks leading up to Christmas, I hope that you will focus on how you can heal any separation between you and God and between you and your brothers and sisters in this world of every race and creed, that you may share more of Jesus' light and life with a world that needs so badly to know God's hope and God's peace.

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1. A story related in The Associated Press. Copyright 1998. All Rights Reserved.
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