

In Position for the Coming

Isaiah 2: 1-5

Matthew 24: 36-44

There are preferred positions when it comes to racing, whether it's cars or horses, or track runners or ice skaters. The idea is that you get in a place where you can gain the best advantage, from which you're more likely to succeed.

If you want to see this in real time, watch a football game. You'll see how the players on the different sides are shifting positions as they try to anticipate what kind of play the other side is expecting. One side will shift itself one way, the other side will counter-shift, and there seems to be a kind of dance taking place as they bounce around before the center snaps the ball and the play starts. Get it right on defense, and the play can be snuffed out before it ever gets started, maybe wreaking enough havoc to be able to sack the quarterback and cause a huge loss in yardage. Or get it right on offense, and the play can be wildly successful and result in a long gain or even a breakaway touchdown. Getting positioned right means everything.

We just saw it this past week as the Christmas shopping season crept before Thanksgiving, particularly with online retailers like Amazon starting their Black Friday specials a full week *before* Black Friday. Brick-and-mortar retailers have also started their sales early, pre-Thanksgiving. Everyone has been trying to get in position ahead of the other. In case you had any doubts, it isn't the Advent-Christmas season out there; it's the crazy, big time shopping season.

However, it **is** the Advent-Christmas season in here. As we witness the world losing its collective mind around us, doing the crazy stuff it does, we turn to the prophet Isaiah who looked at the crazy stuff happening to God's people around him. He responds by articulating his prophecy, both a condemnation of the corrupt practices of God's people, and a vision of God's future for them.

The prophet Isaiah sees the position of God's people as they're besieged by the Assyrians, predecessors of the Babylonians who overran the northern kingdom of Israel and menaced the southern kingdom of Judah and the holy city Jerusalem, roughly a hundred years before the Babylonians conquered the Assyrians.

Isaiah does not bring gentle words of encouragement or assurance for the present season to God's people. Earlier in chapter 1, he describes how the punishment of the Northern Kingdom was God's judgment on their faithlessness, condemned to destruction like Sodom and Gomorrah. God's wrath will soon be turned on Judah and Jerusalem, for their sins against God are no less egregious than Israel's. God's ultimate action against their sinfulness will have a cleansing effect, redeeming the land and the holy city for the new work of God. Call it "transforming destruction."

Our reading begins the 2nd chapter. Isaiah describes what God will do when all is made right again, after the sins are purged and the evils are destroyed. He describes the restoration of the holy city to its rightful, intended place, and more. Not only does the

vision include returning holiness to the city for this people, but it visualizes how *all nations will stream to it*, and how, *Many peoples will come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord.'* Isaiah sees a different Jerusalem, not the threatened, cowering, corrupt center run by sinful leaders. Isaiah's vision has it redeemed to be the seat of God's kingdom where truth, justice, and righteousness are embraced, and where peace and equity are the new standards.

Here, the words are repeated that we also hear from the prophet Micah, a contemporary of Isaiah,: *He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nations will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.* In a land that expects vast destruction and is threatened by a murderous army, where warfare has defined each generation, the prophets declare a transformation of the expected and customary. God's mighty works in the Spirit will reduce the implements of war into tools of productivity and harvest, and the energies and efforts of training and preparing for war are turned into constructive purposes that produce abundance and life, not death and destruction.

If this sounded pie-in-the-sky to the people of that age, imagine what it would be for **our** age. Take the \$585 billion invested annually in war-making capacity just in our nation alone, and turn that money into water pumps and vaccines and schools in the developing world. We could develop alternative energy, land and water conservation, and actually take global warming seriously. We could ensure health care for all citizens and truly fund public education. That's the radical import of what it means to transform materiel of war into tools of peace.

Such a vision sounds so ludicrous that it's like a waste of words. But why is that? Why does it sound off-the-charts nutty? It's because we *doubt* and *dismiss* the power of peacemaking. We *trust* and have *faith* in the power of war-making, no differently than every nation in history that has projected itself onto the world stage. It's a faith statement. Our faith is in what shows power, and our faith is stronger when the power is more deadly and overwhelming. We are **faithless** when it comes to peacemaking, reconciliation, and mutuality, the work of the Kingdom of God.

We appreciate and have faith in what is customary and expected. Really, it's no faith at all. It's simply our old familiar rut. In that old familiar rut, we make 'the **unexpected**' into 'the **unacceptable**.' And then in reaction, we embrace the status quo as if it was something blessed and beneficial, rather than perceiving its reality as corrupt, unjust, and detrimental.

The prophet's last words in the section are, *Come, O house of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the Lord.* It means, 'Come, children of my ancient promise, walk out of your darkness and into the light that the Lord your God alone will provide.'

The vision ends with the invitation to make a genuine faith commitment to the kind of faithful future that God longs to provide his people. But will the people emerge from the darkness into the light of the way of the Lord? Will they position themselves

with faith in the promise of God's future, or position themselves with a failed past that keeps faith with the sinful ways of the world?

Positioning emerges as an issue in Jesus' discussion with his disciples, and Jesus needs to maneuver them toward a faithful perspective, like Isaiah did with his audience.

Jesus relates a similar theme to Isaiah's transforming destruction. Jesus describes to his disciples the last days before the end of the age. He likens it to the great flood of Noah's time when only those faithful to God were prepared for the transforming destructive acts of God. In coming days, Jesus says there will be no physical ark like Noah built. Rather, the sanctuary for believers will be an inner spiritual condition of faithfulness, humility, and obedience.

He gives two examples of what would be normal people doing normal things, everyday folks about their daily tasks. At the coming of the Son of Man, one thing will be experienced by the one faithfully and spiritually prepared and positioned, who has developed that inner sanctuary of devotion, but something entirely different will occur to the unprepared, ill-positioned, and inattentive.

Today's popular belief in "the rapture" where the saved disappear instantly into heaven and the sinners are left behind for destruction is **not** supported here. This is also **not** about the individual who faces an end time in their personal life and must get positioned right with God. Both of these miss the point.

Here, Jesus is being metaphorical, not literal. His point is that the leaven of God's transformation is *already* sown in the world, working silently, mysteriously and inexorably on life and society. At the right time, the time of God's choosing, God will act to bring about a new age and the fulfillment of his promise and his kingdom. Then the hidden will suddenly be revealed, and all life will be transformed.

But you and I – we don't know what day that will be.

"Keep watch," Jesus tells his disciples. This does **not** mean 'watch what's going on in the world,' **as if** you could read signs foretelling the coming of the Son of Man and the end of the age. On the contrary, the disciples are told to be watchful **over their own faith and spirit**.

If you've placed your hope and trust in worldly things, what's passing and unworthy, then you'll be lost when the time for a new way and a new life comes. The unexpected will come upon the unwitting, those tied to the world and its ways rather than the Kingdom and the Spirit of the Lord. They'll be unprepared, out of position.

Interestingly, Jesus uses the imagery of a thief coming in the night who surprises the householder. Of course, in talking about the coming of the Lord, the thief then would be Jesus. Hmm. Wait a minute – Jesus as the thief? More like, Jesus as the threat. And who or what does Jesus threaten?

Jesus is the threat to everything that lulls us into complacency with worldly comfort and detracts from spiritual strength with worldly distraction. If the householder knew when the thief was coming, then it would be a pretty stupid and busted thief. Jesus isn't stupid; you won't know when he comes. The only method for dealing with this "thief" is spiritual preparation, being positioned to stand with Lord and the ways of his Kingdom in every season. And let those threatened by the coming of the Kingdom tremble because those enamored of the world will lose what they cherish the most and be lost amid the Kingdom of compassion and grace, of peace and new life.

The ancient promise to God's people, the prophet's radical Kingdom vision, and the spiritual instruction of Jesus all awaken us to a new season. Now – today – we're called to join the ancients, to position ourselves to wait and to hope. We know that our God is full of surprises, that our God is even now working through his promise. We're reminded that God's ancient promise has not been forgotten – far from it. Yes, the day and the time remain unknown, but his promise of new life and a new age is even now growing and developing in our midst, swelling expectant like a mother soon to give birth.

The faithful are called to persevere, to hope, and to expect the fulfillment of God's promise to be with his people always.

This ancient promise is ours. Let us begin this new season hoping and watching together for the coming of our Lord.