

Welcome to my little booklet, *Advent Gems*.

I am a retired missionary and pastor. My wife and I spent ten years as missionaries in Canada's Western Arctic, followed by a few more years in southern Canada. Then I entered pastoral ministry, serving a number of western Canada's rural churches.

During my years of pastoral ministry, the churches I served observed the Season of Advent. We found doing that assisted us to focus on the meaning of Christmas in the midst of all the hustle and bustle that commercialism brings to the season.

For anyone who may not be aware, let me share a brief word about Advent: The "Season of Advent" became included in the Church's celebrations during the Middle Ages. It emphasizes the themes of Hope, Peace, Joy and Love, and provides a time of anticipating Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. With a forward gaze, it also symbolizes the Church waiting in anticipation of the return of Christ.

For the scripture readings, I've chosen to use *The Message*, published by NavPress Publishing Group, a translation that remains true to the biblical themes while using a more contemporary idiom. If you're not already familiar with *The Message*, I think you'll like the experience.

While the Advent themes of Hope, Peace, Joy and Love may be well-known by many, my treatment of them is a bit

unique, somewhat informal. I hope you catch the humour, are nudged by the poetry, and see the story behind the allegory; and, I hope you are supported in your anticipation and celebration of the coming of Jesus, the Saviour, who was born in a smelly barn.

One more thing – May I suggest that you limit your reading to only the one Advent theme of the week, and that you read it with your heart, not your mind, perhaps out loud(?), laughing(?) and allow time for contemplation.

God bless you! And Merry Christmas.

They Knew Mary Had a Baby, But...

“...so we can live the way we were made.”

Isaiah 2:1-5

“The Message Isaiah got regarding Judah and Jerusalem:

There’s a day coming when the mountain of God’s House will be ‘The Mountain’ - solid, towering over all mountains.

All nations will river toward it, people from all over set out for it. They’ll say, ‘Come, let’s climb God’s Mountain, go to the House of the God of Jacob. He’ll show us the way he works so we can live the way we’re made.’ Zion’s the source of the revelation. God’s Message comes from Jerusalem. He’ll settle things fairly between the nations. He’ll make things right between many peoples. They’ll turn their swords into shovels, their spears into hoes. No more will nation fight nation; they won’t play war anymore. Come, family of Jacob, let’s live in the light of God.”

So, this is the season of expectancy. Well, we know what to expect, don't we – for Christmas, that is – Santa and his reindeer! But what if Santa came with oxen drawing a pioneer wagon, or, how about a dog team pulling a sled? Would we still believe?

But really, don't we already know what to expect when Jesus comes - be it to a barn in Bethlehem or a boat on stormy Galilee, to Lazarus' house or perhaps to Pilate's court? Don't we know what to expect after his execution when he was carried to a tomb that had been chiselled out of a large rock? Don't we already know the stories? So, how would we describe our sense of expectation as we approach Christmas this year?

The Old Testament scriptures can help us prepare for what to expect when Divine Presence intrudes our life-space. The story is told against a variety of themes in those ancient days. This season, Isaiah the prophet shares his vision with us.

We don't usually think of a prophet as an artist, but Isaiah was. Much of what he wrote is in poetic format. In fact, poetry is prevalent in much of the Old Testament.

Poetry was widely used by the peoples of the Middle East for centuries. It aided in retention of, for example, local political rhetoric as well as passing on local history. It was employed by both Hebrew and Arabic peoples and their leaders. Like other artists, Isaiah looks at everyday life and re-forms it with dynamic expression; and, if we care to listen to this prophet/poet ranting in the marketplace, we may find cause to pause in this season of expectancy.

In more recent years, the poet, Irving Layton alludes to his vision of the role of the poet: "The poet is someone who can't help mythologizing his experiences. He exaggerates, distorts, fictionalizes. In him the will-to-power takes the form of investing even the trifling and banal with symbolic significance." (*The Gucci Bag*, by Irving Layton.)

Perhaps poetry is like a baby king being born in a stone barn accompanied by a few ordinary animals like donkeys and chickens, spiders, mice, and goats. But, back to Isaiah...

It was in such poetic inspiration that Isaiah saw the small hill on which the Temple in Jerusalem stood become the largest, most significant and influential mountain in the universe. He saw the United Nations come to it. He saw peace carried from it to Myanmar, Syria, Mali, Afghanistan, and the "Gangs of New York." He saw building supplies taken to Puerto Rico and Haiti, and schools built for the girls of Iran and Pakistan without interference from extremists who claimed to be religious, but were not. He saw men holding the hands of hungry children who live on the dumps of the wealthy cities of the world and walk with them to the Garden of Eden. The world became blessed by the energy and care of the likes of you and me.

In his vision, Isaiah saw adequate water facilities established in needy aboriginal communities in North America. He saw pure water freely supplied to everyone on Earth. He saw people like you and me taking the health of this planet to heart, making intentional life-style changes that were effective, and he saw us discontinuing our reliance on the values of a secularly-based society to form our lifestyles.

All these things were made possible in the glory of the morning sun that sparkled brilliantly from that little mountain that became the Greatest Mountain.

Just like the spiritual quest of the pilgrims whose hope carries them along the El Camino Trail in northern Spain, the peoples of the world left the Temple Mount to trek across the land and bless it. And life sprang up from the dry dust where their sandals trod.

But it disturbs me – and I hope it disturbs you - that this hasn't happened, yet. We find it far too easy to allow conventional values to determine the nature of our journeys, and those values so easily crowd out "God dreams." We find it too easy to

continue bowing at the feet of things that wear out, corrode and break, and which we then discard on the dumps of the world for the poor and their children.

Yet, we would not say that we deny the essence of our faith and the hope it fosters. For faith, the writer of the Book of Hebrews describes as “The fundamental fact of existence is that this trust in God, this faith, is the firm foundation under everything that makes life worth living.” (Hebrews 11:1) A-ha, there is a “firm foundation...that makes life worth living” and it’s rooted in the hope of faith.

Do we understand that Isaiah’s poem flows with hope from the fountain of faith, that hope bubbles in the spring of faith?

If we are willing to embrace as valid the “God-dream” of Isaiah, we may be able to begin our journey through Advent with a quicker heart b-beat, b-beat, b-beat as our eyes scan the horizon with hope for ... what? – We may not be sure; but then, encountering the unexpected in our Advent quest may prove to be a surprising experience.

After all, everybody knew Mary had a baby, they just didn’t expect what they got, and what they got I don’t think they could have hoped for. For the baby, in the ultimate mystery of sacred themes, was Immanuel (God With Us). They got a baby boy; but they also got a man who was compelled to act out the essence of the “God Nation” – the Kingdom – that Isaiah ranted about in the marketplace hundreds of years earlier.

So here we are, again entering Advent (yawn). Are we questing to envision how the Christ is among us this year? Do we have a sense of hope for God to re-form our vision from seeing a hill to seeing a Great Mountain?

Isaiah’s dream of God Nation closes with an invitation to walk in the light of the Lord, inviting us to give ourselves to a new way, a new day.

In fact, the principle of “entanglement” found in quantum physics suggests that we are not alone in our God-quest. For history tells us that our Paleolithic ancestors in the Stone Age - 17,000 years ago - began to sense what could be called “Divine Presence.” That inner pulsing of divinity was expressed in thousands of frescoes and engravings in the dark caverns of Lascaux in France’s Dordogne and other regions. Hope engendered God-quest is a human tradition. Are we living our tradition? Hoping with those who have hoped? Questing with those who have quested?

Again, this Advent, we are invited to quest with hope on The Mountain, to carry the gospel’s hope into lostness, darkness and injustice, beating those automatic weapons, Improvised Explosive Device’s, Rocket Propelled Grenades, mines and machetes, knives and fists – those tools with which our world’s children are too well acquainted - into life-giving, life-sustaining utensils to be utilized by the very hands that pulled the triggers, buried the IED’s and land mines, loaded the RPG’s, and hacked off children’s arms with machetes. Come, let’s climb God’s Mountain.

Yes, “They Knew Mary Had a Baby” but they could not have hoped for what they got.

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