

Text: Isaiah 2: 1-5
Title: What Isaiah Saw
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On a clear winter's day in 1981 I got off the bus at the corner of 109th and Michigan, in front of the *Why Not Lounge*, and met Rev. Tony Van Zanten – the founder/director of Roseland Christian Ministries. I was a greenhorn from Iowa; he was a savvy urban pastor. He became a friend, mentor, and hero.

At that first meeting, after joking around with “Duck” Simmons, I got in Rev. Tony's van for a neighborhood tour.

On every block there were boarded-up buildings and abandoned houses; at every turn, vacant lots and vagrants. There were bars on the windows and potholes in the streets. There were wig shops, liquor stores, currency exchanges, and storefront churches with flamboyant names on hand-scrawled signs. I was wide-eyed – we didn't have urban blight in Orange City, Iowa.

And everybody was black. I felt really white. Backyard mechanics passed a bottle around a fifty-five-gallon-drum-fire. Young women with bundled-up children waited at the bus stop. A bunch of boys gathered in a garage converted into a gym with a low ceiling and one basket. The crossing guard waited for kids to cross, streetwalkers waited for cars to stop, as cops cruised by. It was engaging, exotic, scary, exciting, overwhelming, and indifferent to my concerns – all at the same time.

That's what I saw.

But Rev. Tony saw something else....

In his eyes every boarded-up building could be a rehabbed sign of God's kingdom. Every liquor store could be converted into a pre-school and every house could be made into a home. The bars on the windows could be reconfigured to frame stained-glass and the vacant lots turned over into gardens. Rev. Tony saw something that most of us don't see.

In the 41 years since, Rev. Tony's essential vision hasn't changed. He still sees every addict as a church member and every hooker as a daughter of the King. He sees in every homeless guy – with a flair for prayin' and preachin' – a future elder for the church. He sees in every burned-out-block the birthplace of the Kingdom. He sees the beauty, inherent goodness, and redemptive value in what most of the world has tossed aside.

And on Sunday mornings he would lift from scripture a picture of hope. He would preach up a storm of encouragement....

Not a starry-eyed-optimism, nor a simplistic naivete, but he would invite the congregation into an unfolding cosmic drama – that begins and ends with God in Christ. And you couldn't help but find yourself (metaphorically) marching toward Zion singing, “Soon and very soon, we're going to see the King...” And

somehow in those moments the darkness was pushed back and there was enough light to see.

As it turns out, Rev. Tony knew dark shadows as bright as any light, but that essential vision has been remarkably untarnished over all these years.

What do you see?

What's your essential vision?

When you look at family and friend, when you watch the news, when you read history, when you peel back all the busyness, banality, anxiety and cultural crud, what do you see? When you look at the currents of politics, economics, race, and religion, what do you see?

The prophet Isaiah saw the coming culmination of history.

Isaiah prophesied when the Assyrians destroyed Israel and threatened Judah. It was a tumultuous time: nations rose and fell, unholy alliances were built and scrapped, populist prophets saw divine judgment and impending destruction in every geo-political tremor. Captivity and exile for the Hebrews was waiting in the wings, and it felt like everything sturdy was breaking loose, everything constructed was cracking up.

But Isaiah saw something different.

Isaiah saw a day coming when Mount Zion (literally or figuratively) would be elevated over Everest – rising up above all other mountains. It would be the navel – the center of all creation. And, just as the Israelites traveled in the desert to receive the law of God from Mount Sinai, so too, all nations will stream toward Mount Zion to receive the law of God. People will flow up the mountain and the law of God will flow down the mountain.

In this new configuration of creation, peace will emerge because God will settle disputes. Peace will endure because God will teach his way. And therefore, nations will beat their weapons of war into farm machinery and their instruments of death will be turned into implements of life. West Point and schools for Jihad will close up shop and we'll learn war no more.

Against every indication of reality, against the chaos of current conditions, against the prognosis of pundits and politicians, Isaiah saw the birthing of a new reality.

It's worth noting that the prophet Micah uses almost identical language for a similar vision. The prophet Joel uses the same wording but offers a decidedly darker vision where plowshare are beaten into swords and pruning hooks into spears....

And yet, these prophets all saw creation coming to a climax. Creation is not careening out of control, but it is coming down a track,...

inevitable,

unstoppable,

under God's control, churning toward God.

In our text, Isaiah saw creation moving toward *shalom*. He saw history ending in light.

What do you see?

What's your essential vision?

On a clear spring day in 1985, at the corner of 109th and Michigan, in front of the *Why Not Lounge*, in the parking lot of Roseland Christian Ministries, my father was murdered. Clarence Hayes, a neighborhood addict looking for money for drugs, held us up, and shot my father point-blank in the side. My father died in my mother's lap.

I remember almost immediately seeing/feeling a profound sadness for the intractable knot of violence, addiction, poverty, inadequate healthcare, easy access to hand guns, lack of education, issues of race and racism, housing policies, policing, and an indifference to human life, etc, etc. I remember the awareness that we were stepping into a pool of the victims of gun violence in Chicago. It was a crowded pool. We only stood out because we were white....

In the 37 years since, my vision hasn't changed much. I still see a complex intractable knot and the pool keeps getting bigger. And yet, I still long for, look for, hope for, yearn after, invest in, and believe in the Kingdom of God.

I still long for, look for, hope for, yearn after, and believe in the coming culmination of history. Wherein we will walk in the light....

In *Following Jesus in a Culture of Fear*, Scott Bader-Sayer writes that our lives are easily ruled by "apocalyptic fear" rather than divine goodness; and that we need a kind of courage to "go on" that is fueled by hope in God. In his words:

Prior to the advent of modernity, most people believed that the world had a story because the world had an author. History is God's story, they would have said, and while humans are capable of creating confusion during the middle scenes of the drama, God never ceases to guide and direct the creation to its good end ... People could trust time and history because they trusted that the God who created the world would finally reconcile all things.

Dear friends, there's no indication that Isaiah saw Jesus of Nazareth as the inauguration of that coming peace. We read Isaiah's prophecy, after the fact, through the lens of Jesus, and we see in that first advent the beginning of the second advent. And in anticipation of that second coming we see the consummation of Isaiah's vision.

Therefore, a fully-formed Advent hope is not a determined optimism that this world is getting better and better until one day we eradicate all that tugs toward disintegration and chaos. Neither is it a fairytale of a faraway land that warms our hearts and teaches us tidy moral lessons.

No. An Advent hope is the trust that God is at work birthing a redeemed, restored, new creation – a new creation that is being born among us in the coming of Jesus Christ.

And so, may this first light of Advent serve as a reminder that we are part of an unfolding story whose author is God in Christ. And as we live into that story, may our vision and our practice be shaped by that coming Kingdom.

May we live in a manner that seeks peace, works for justice, shares forgiveness, and that sees friend and enemy as sons and daughters of the King. May we live with a deep gratitude, an abiding hope, and the courage to “go on.” May we live without fear because we see the end of the story.

Look. I know that it’s normal, sensible really, to live by what our eyes tell us is reality. And therefore, for many, distraction, anger, despair, restlessness, cynicism, and indifference are common viewpoints. It’s easy to shrug off the vision of Isaiah as quaint religious rhetoric that’s removed from reality. But, I don’t know a better story; I don’t know another light to live by....

So, dear friends, may Isaiah’s vision of God’s coming illumine what we see and define how we live. And even as we light a candle to remind us let us break bread and drink wine as a foretaste of the hope that is born among us. For one day all things will be reconciled in Christ and we will all walk in the light.

Family of God in Christ Jesus come to the table in hope.
For a new creation is being born among us.
Amen.