

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
Alive in the Adventure of Jesus: Endings and Beginnings  
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Isaiah 9:1-7, Luke 1:26-38

It seemed like it would never arrive. Every day I would rush home from school and look at the pile of mail to see if it had come. And day after day it never arrived, until, as if by some miracle, there it was; the Sears' Wish Book. The Wish Book was not your usual Sears' catalogue filled with the usual stuff. No, this was a child's Christmas playground filled with toys galore. It allowed me to dream of being in a plastic Fort Apache (OK, I know, it isn't politically correct but it was the early 60s) or World War II. But more important than the toys was what the Wish Book represented. It represented that Christmas was coming. For those of you who have lived in the north with changing seasons, snow falls, and the like, this may seem a bit odd. But I grew up in Houston where the only change in the fall to winter was going from very hot to less hot. There were no sleigh rides or jingling bells. So the Wish Book then was that annual marker that Christmas was about to arrive.

In some ways I think that the passages that we read this morning are the sort of church markers that Christmas is upon us. Whenever we read about a son being given, or about Mary being honored by the gift of her messianic child, we know that Christmas is coming. We know that one more time, we will celebrate the birth of Jesus. Yet, when we see these passages in this way, as Advent road signs, saying Christmas is just ahead, we miss the impact that these words originally held. They were not annual reminders. They were the ending of one era and the beginning of another. They were the shutting of the door on a horrific past and opening a door to a bright and amazing future. For Isaiah it was a declaration that God was acting to defeat Judah's enemies and turn a time of war, bloodshed, darkness, and fear into a time of peace and prosperity. For Mary, the angel Gabriel's declaration was one that signaled the end of Israel's captivity to the Romans and Greeks and the beginning of the golden age of the Kingdom of God. These were at one time, world changing endings and beginnings.

In a sense what was ending was the way things had always been; war, bloodshed, violence, oppression, poverty and pain. What was beginning, was what my wife Cindy calls a Star Trek world. What she means by that is that in the Star Trek world, the earth has become a place of peace and prosperity. Everyone has enough. There is no money because if you need something it is provided. There is no more war because people understand that creating is better than destroying. This was the kind of world they would encounter through the open door of God's action. The question for us this morning becomes this then, what do we do with these endings and beginnings. What do we do with the fact that this Star Trek world, this God's

Kingdom world has not arrived? What do we do if we are to honor the understandings of Isaiah and Mary, understandings of one epoch ending and another beginning? What do we do to be not simply pass by these stories as markers of a coming Christmas? I think are two things we need to do.

First, we need to believe that such a world is possible and underway; though it may not be possible to see it complete in our lifetimes or even in our children's or grandchildren's life times, we need to believe that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, something fundamental changed in the universe that what was once unthinkable, a world of peace and reconciliation, is a possibility. I realize that in the current situation in which we find ourselves as a nation and as a planet, this may seem unrealistic. Yet that possibility of God's Kingdom world is at the heart of our message to the world. This is the message that we follow the Prince of Peace, that we follow the one who makes the impossible possible. We follow the one whose life makes possible a radically renewed world in which peace is a reality.

The second thing that we need to do is to live this reality. What I mean by that is that we, as followers of Jesus Christ, as members of Everybody's Church are called to live the reality of this new world as best we can. And if there is ever a time when we need to live into this new reality it is now. It is now because, as I have said before, this election has caused us to think, say and do things we have never done before. It has caused us to be judgmental about others because of who they voted for as if a single vote defines the essence of a person. It has caused us to see the world in terms of black and white; one candidate (you take your pick) is Darth Vader and the other Obi-Wan Kenobi. It has caused us to break old friendships and unfriend people on Facebook...though not spending so much time on Facebook might not be such a bad thing. It has caused us to be angry all the time. It is as if the old reality never left and the new reality never arrived. But it has arrived. So now we are to live into it. We are to live into it by seeing everyone through the eyes of love. We are to be those who work for the reconciliation of the world, and of our friends and family. We are to be those who demonstrate that people of diverse political, theological and cultural beliefs can be one Christ-centered community. We are to offer the world a glimpse of this new reality by being Everybody's Church where Democrats and Republicans, conservatives and liberals, Michigan and Michigan State, and even Ohio State fans can live and work and love the world together.

My challenge then for us all, and I mean us, including me, is to ask ourselves, how am I living this new reality among my friends, neighbors and even the strangers I meet?