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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church

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Advent 1/Year A

Isaiah 2:1-5

## “Keep, Give, Throw Away”

*Lord, once again we come to the season of Advent when we await your arrival. We know this should be a time of watchful waiting, but it's hard to sit still when there's so much to do and so much happening around us. Forgive us our impatience, and help us to reorganize our priorities and to find balance in our lives. Help us to walk in your light today and every day. Amen.*

The newly formed Worship Arts Team began planning these Advent worship services back in October, when the weather was warm and Halloween was still a few weeks away. We began our planning by looking at the assigned scripture passages, reading through them, and making general notes about what we observed.

Among the many things we observed in the readings, was the sense that there's a lot of coming and going in the texts, especially in today's readings. Isaiah says, “**Come**, let us **go up** to the mountain of the Lord” and “let us **walk** in the light of the Lord.” The psalm for today says, “I was glad when they said unto me, ‘Let us **go** to the house of the Lord.’” In Matthew, Jesus warns the disciples that no one knows when the Son of Man of **will come** again.

All of this coming and going can be a bit tiring, don't you think? Kind of like the holidays themselves, yes? Today is one of the busiest days for airline travel as all those Thanksgiving guests **make their way** back home. **The stores** are **coming and going** with people who are busy shopping for Christmas. People are **scurrying** from one place to another, trying to fit in a million different activities.

It can all be exhausting and stressful. But it doesn't have to be. It can be different. In fact, I'm determined it will be, because I don't know about you, but I am at a place this year where I want to find balance, and I suspect I'm not alone. I want to **enjoy** Advent and Christmas and everything that goes with it, but I also want to keep it in perspective.

Last year I purchased 86 gifts . . .and that doesn't include stocking stuffers. How do I know this? Because I have a handy-dandy app on my phone that I use to keep track of gifts bought, wrapped, and given. Now, 86 gifts sounds like a lot of presents, and it is. But I also have a lot of people to buy for, some of whom prefer quantity over quality! But seeing that number made me step back and go, “What? 86 gifts? No one's that good!”

But I also don't want to be the preacher who rails against the overly-hyped commercial message of Christmas, who refuses to let the church sing Christmas carols when it's still Advent, and who harps on how we shouldn't let the giddiness of the season get in the way of the real reason for the season. I once worked for a minister who proudly proclaimed one December that he and his family were doing all of their Christmas shopping the day after Christmas because that's when the really good sales happen, and

I couldn't help but think to myself that there was something not quite right in his thinking. Sort of like there's something not quite right about buying 86 gifts.

Somehow, I want to find the balance between 86 gifts and shopping on December 26<sup>th</sup>. I want to enjoy the season, even some of the overly hyped commercialized parts of it, but I also want to find the *holy* in the *holiday*. You see, I think there's something in all of us that longs for something Big during this season. That's why the commercial message is so powerful-the advertisements and everything else tap into this yearning. But those of us who spend time focusing on the religious reason for the holiday know there's something, believes there's something, and hopes there is something more than what the advertisers sell. We, too, believe there is something Big that awaits us. But the something Big we're yearning for can't be found at our local shopping mall or big box store. So we come here to find that something Big, and light our candles, and hear a word of hope, and wait for the Light to pierce through the darkness.

Today, we wait with Isaiah, who is the mighty prophet of waiting days. He speaks to us of something Big that will happen. "In days to come," he says, "the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob.'"

When I first read these words, I couldn't help but compare Isaiah's vision of many people streaming to the mountain of the Lord, to the videos of many Black Friday shoppers streaming into the stores. What a dichotomy! That dichotomy led me to ponder how different things might look if more people streamed to the mountain of the Lord than stream to Best Buy! What would that world look like? How would it be different?

Well, in order to answer that question, we can look to Isaiah, who tells us what that world would like. Isaiah paints a picture for us, because he doesn't tell us about the word of God he hears, he tells us about the word of God he sees. And what does he see?

He sees all nations streaming to Mt. Zion, which includes nations that are the enemy of Israel and Judah. He sees people walking in God's path. He sees people being transformed by God's teachings. He sees people beating swords into plowshares, and spears into pruning hooks. He sees a world where nations won't lift a sword against another nation, and where there will be no more war.

Sounds a little crazy, doesn't it? Can we imagine a future like that? Can we see it?

Did you know that these words of Isaiah are carved into a wall opposite the UN building in NYC? Did you know that located in the North Garden of the UN Headquarters there is also a bronze sculpture titled: "Let Us Beat Our Swords into Ploughshares"? It was created by a Soviet artist and presented to the United Nations on December 4, 1959 by the government of the USSR. The sculpture, depicting the figure of a man holding a hammer aloft in one hand and a sword in the other, which he is making into a ploughshare, is meant to symbolize humanity's desire to put an end to war, and to convert the tools of destruction into creative tools for the benefit of humankind.

Can we see these words come to light as the United Nations wrings its hands over 100,000 people killed in Syria? Can we see it?

And just so you know, Isaiah isn't naïve. He opens his book with these words:

*Your country lies desolate, your cities are burned with fire; in your very presence aliens devour your land; it is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners. And daughter Zion is left like a booth in the vineyard, like a shelter in a cucumber field, like a besieged city. If the Lord of hosts had not left us a few survivors, we would have been like Sodom, and become like Gomorrah.*

Don't kid yourself, Isaiah knows about war and swords.

But he believes it doesn't have to be that way; that there is an alternative; that there is something Big that awaits those who walk in the path of the Lord. So he paints for us a hopeful vision of what life can look like when people put aside their differences, when peace reigns, and where military budgets are no longer needed so schools are fully funded and so are hunger programs, too; which is what I think swords being beat into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks would look like today.

I believe this is the image Isaiah paints of the future, of what the world could look like if we are willing to walk in the light of the Lord. And it is a future filled with plowshares and pruning hooks; the absence of war; and more light than darkness.

You know, part of what we do in Advent is look toward the future. I've said it before but it's worth repeating again, that Advent has two faces—the one that looks back to the birth of Christ (that's the one we tend to focus on), but also a face that looks to the future when God's kingdom will come, and God's will will be done, on earth as it is heaven.

And so Advent looks to the future with hope. In Advent, we have the courage to believe that with God, all things are possible.

This is the promise of Advent. That the God who set in the world in motion at the very beginning, is also the God who raised up a Savior for **us, who came to us, who lived among us, and who was born among us.**

And so let me suggest that during Advent, we find the balance so that we can see Isaiah's words come to life.

As we enter this season of Advent, I invite each of us to not only walk in the light, but to be the light for other people, especially for those who sit in darkness.

To do this, I've decided to follow the advice of the de-clutter experts. You know how they encourage us to clean out our closets by deciding what to keep, give or throw away? Well, I've decided to do that with some of our holiday traditions and happenings so I can find balance and find the holy holiday.

I'm throwing away:

- Shopping in stores. It doesn't bring me much joy. Last year Amazon Prime was my BFF!
- Spend money on meaningless gifts. I'd like the ones I buy to be meaningful, which may mean there will be fewer presents, but that equates to less wrapping (a chore I'm happy to throw away).

I'm giving away this (which means I can bring it back, if I'd like):

- Getting out every Christmas decoration. This is mostly out of necessity, since our kitchen is being gutted on December 9. But I'm totally OK with simplifying. Since I'm only giving this away, I can pull out all of the decorations next year if I'd like.
- I'm giving cookie decorating, since I won't have a kitchen. I actually like to bake, so I think I'll exchange this tradition for another one. Julia and I have talked about having a crafty weekend in lieu of a baking one.

But there are other traditions we are keeping for sure:

- Because I like a little commercial Christmas with my holy holiday, we'll watch silly Christmas movies, like A Christmas Story and Elf.
- We'll put up two trees, because we have way too many ornaments for one.
- I'll listen to cheesy Christmas music in my car and sing along, too. Especially if it involves Barry Manilow.

As you go through your week, and especially as you find yourself stressing out over everything that needs to be done, remember that not everything does need to be done. You can throw away, or give away, some of your traditions or to do list. You can also keep what is most meaningful, so that you can walk in the light of the Lord and therefore help others walk in the light of the Lord, too.

This Advent, I encourage you to find the balance and the holy in the holiday.

Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord.

Amen.