

## To The World We Dream About

Just before my final Sunday as one of the pastors of Williamsburg United Methodist Church, we hosted a *Guns to Gardens* event. This was done in partnership with the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy and RAWtools, a national faith-based effort dedicated to transforming weapons into tools of life. Gun owners brought firearms they no longer wanted. On the spot, blacksmiths dismantled them, heated the metal and hammered it into trowels and gardening tools. People who carried grief from gun violence were invited to swing a hammer themselves—not in vengeance but in healing. A memorial banner honored loved ones lost. A prayer space held stories too deep for words.

The point was transformation. As one leader shared, it was “to see a weapon become something new and useful, something that brings life from the earth.” It is violence literally reshaped into nourishment. It is despair hammered into hope. It is a living sign of the world we dream about—the world God dreams about.

And it is *exactly* the world the prophet Isaiah envisions when he imagines swords beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks.

This is where Advent begins—not in comfort but in longing. Not with things as they are but with the world God promises.

The people of God in today’s Scriptures are captivated by God’s dream for the world. They sing it out with vulnerability, courage and—above all—hope. Isaiah, the psalmist, Matthew

and Paul and generations of believers lift their voices not because the world is already healed but because they trust the One who promises healing.

Before Isaiah's words of peace, he paints a grim picture of violence and devastation. Israel and its neighbors are battered by injustice and oppression. Into this darkness, God speaks: *It will not always be this way. Turn to me and know peace. War will cease. Weapons will become gardening tools.* Isaiah offers a daring alternative vision, and he sings out God's promises.

Psalms 122 is also a song of faith. Pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem — a city scarred by conflict—lift their voices in praise, praying for peace even when peace feels unlikely. They, too, sing with vulnerability and hope.

So we ask honestly: **Were they naïve?** Were the prophets and pilgrims clinging to false hope?

And we ask the same of ourselves as Advent begins. This season calls us to remember Christ's first coming and to anticipate his coming again—when the world will finally be remade through love, justice, peace and redemption. To trust these promises, to proclaim that Christ has conquered sin and death and will come again—does this make us naïve? Or does it make us faithful?

Every Advent, we gather and take a deep breath; we pray and remember. We sing ancient words we know by heart—carols of light breaking into darkness, of God drawing near, of peace deeper than conflict. It may feel nostalgic or unrealistic, yet when we sing, we join our ancestors—the prophets, the psalmists, people of faith and courage—who sang out God's promises with hope.

Think of Mary when she learns she is to bear the Son of God, she responds with song: *God has shown mercy, cast down the proud, lifted up the humble, filled the hungry with good things.* She sings not because everything is fixed but because God is moving. She sees what is made possible through God's grace. She envisions God's dream.

As we mark the new church year, we proclaim what God has done, is doing, and will do for all creation. At the Lord's Table we rehearse the same refrain: *Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.* In Advent, we remember who God is—and to remember who we are.

Rev. James Howell writes in *Why This Jubilee?* that our liturgical way, our seasonal hymns and readings do not deny the world's darkness; rather, they shine within it. Advent, he says, “perches on the border between light and darkness, shadow and shining.” We do not ignore grief, loss, conflict or fear. But neither do we despair. Light shines brightest against shadow and in defiance of bleakness we still sing, and we still work for peace with justice.

One of your own, the amazing Ellen Bushman, has been faithfully serving as Executive Director with Respite Care at Williamsburg UMC. This ministry is where one of the clearest signs of this kind of Advent hope appears. Music there unlocks something sacred. People who struggle with memory suddenly remember lyrics. People who cannot move easily tap a rhythm; some even dance. Music reaches the core of who we are—where faith lives, where God meets us, where courage and hope begin to rise again. In singing, we feel God's presence and find strength to sing God's promises.

Advent begins with longing. Instead of answers, it gives us questions: What world are we waiting for? What world are we preparing for? What world has God promised—and what world are we called to help build?

We admit and lament: the world we inhabit does not look like the world God intends. Isaiah's vision of swords beaten into plowshares seems far from reality. Psalm 122's joyful procession toward the house of the Lord feels distant. Yet Advent insists that these are not fantasies. They are God's dream—and Christ is coming to bring them to fulfillment.

This evokes a line from the new *Wicked* film musical: "There's no place like home." The talented Cynthia Erivo, who plays Elphaba, is misunderstood and ostracized. Her efforts to bring justice for the oppressed are seen as resistance of the imperial order. Yet in a song added for this movie, she sings about her commitment to "home." Her longing is not of nostalgia or comfort. She mourns, "*Why do I love this place that's never loved me? A place that seems to be devolving and even wanting to? But Oz is more than just a place It's a promise, an idea and I want to help make it come true.*" Her's is the risky, hopeful work of standing for what is right in a world not yet healed. It is choosing to build the world we dream about even when the world we see resists it.

Advent invites us to do the same: to hope, to stay awake, and to act.

In Romans, Paul writes urgently: "*You know what time it is... it is now the moment to wake from sleep.*"

Advent is a spiritual alarm clock. Paul warns us against spiritual drowsiness—against drifting, numbing ourselves or surrendering to despair. “*The night is far gone,*” he says. “*The day is near.*” So we are to “put on the armor of light” and “put on the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Advent waiting is never passive. It is active, intentional, transformative. God’s future does not excuse us from responsibility; it empowers us for it.

What people of faith and good will can offer is an active and stubborn hope. Paul calls us to wake up to a different way of living—choosing: integrity, compassion and courage.

In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus describes his return with images of surprise—not to frighten us but to sharpen our attention. Like a flood, like a thief in the night, like people at work or rest—ordinary life pulsing with extraordinary possibility.

The point is not predicting the moment of Christ’s return. The point is preparing our hearts so that whenever he comes, we are already living the life of the kingdom.

Faithfulness is not dramatic heroism; it is consistent devotion. It appears in small choices, unnoticed acts of compassion, quiet courage—the everyday work of discipleship. We continue to show up and provide warmth for unhoused neighbors, advocate for the refugee and immigrant, feed the hungry and care for the sick.

The world we dream about takes shape one faithful decision at a time. Dreaming of and working toward a better world is costly, risky and deeply necessary.

Advent readiness is not anxiety. It is attentiveness. It is the posture of people who know God's future is a promise—one already unfolding in our present choices.

The world we dream about is the world God dreams about.

Advent teaches that “home” is not something behind us. Home is the kingdom of God. Home is the world remade by Christ. In God's great mystery, it is already here and not yet. Home is where we are headed—and what we are invited to begin shaping even now.

We are not asked to escape the world as it is, but to join God in transforming it. To take up our spiritual hammer and beat swords into plowshares. To live as citizens of a future kingdom that is already breaking in. To stand with courage. To sing with pilgrims. To walk in the light even while shadows linger.

Advent proclaims: **The world we dream about is already on its way. Thanks be to God.**