

Willow Glen UMC Advent 1 December 1, 2013
Isaiah 2:1-5; Matthew 24:36-44

If you follow trends, you'll know that lots of baby names that were popular a hundred years ago are making a comeback today. For the girls: Lucy, Rose, Grace, Ruby; for the boys: Charles, Henry, William, Frank.

Everything, even our babies, are going vintage these days. It's understandable. When the present is uncertain and the future is scary, the past starts looking better and better.

This season of the year, we all get to thinking about the past, don't we? Me, I'm thinking about Christmas when I was in college. I'd finish my exams in late December and get on a plane in Boston. I'd get off another plane in Billings and the temperature might be 20 below zero. My nose hairs would freeze as soon as I stepped outside and that was the sign: "Welcome home!" After checking on horses, I'd let Mom do the cooking. I'd do the sleeping and wake up thinking, "This must be heaven." But I also remember the Christmas that we

grandkids got our Christmas checks in the mail from Grandpa Irelan. They arrived the day after he died.

Good or bad, we all have memories we go back to at this time of year, and we have a hard time appreciating the Scripture readings for the first Sunday in Advent. That's because they don't let us look back. They force us to look forward. When we we'd rather reminisce about the first coming of Christ, we have to hear about the Second Coming.

I'm sorry that Harold Camping made it all so campy. Harold is a civil-engineer-turned-prophet-of-the-apocalypse who ran Family Radio out of Oakland. He put hundreds of ads on billboards across the country to broadcast the end of the world coming May 21, 2011. And when Jesus didn't come back to us, Harold almost went to Jesus. In June he suffered a bad stroke.

Now Camping was a Bible teacher all his life, so I want to ask him, "What part of 'no one knows' do you not understand?" Billboards and ads in buses won't change the fact

that we don't know the *when*, nor do we know the *how* of Christ's coming.

All we get in the Gospel of Matthew are metaphors. Jesus says that the Lord's coming will be sudden like a flood. It will be shocking like a thief in the night. We have to keep awake. We have to be ready.

So here to interrupt our regularly scheduled holiday memories comes a most meddlesome Messiah. He doesn't want us to get stuck in our past but caught up in his future. So, he's warning us that if the past is where we spend our time, we're going to get left behind.

We don't want to be in the situation like that of the two women who were grinding meal together. Here's another metaphor: I can imagine them going about their daily chores and chatting. One of them is telling the other once again about all the bad things that have ever happened to her in life. She's said it all before because she's one of those people. She carries

around so much baggage from the past that she can't live in the present nor does she have a free hand to receive a blessing from the future. So when the future arrives, she's left to her grinding.

Makes you wonder how many of us are living our lives like this woman, with our heads down, our hands full, not really living, but day by day, just grinding away. To us, Jesus says, Heads up! Keep awake. "Something's coming/I don't know what it is/but it is/gonna be great." [Stephen Sondheim, *West Side Story*]

I will never get to go back home to Billings. My parents don't live there anymore. For some reason that I don't understand, God made the world so that time runs forward, not backward, and that's how our lives are supposed to run. That's what Advent is telling us. The word is from the Latin and it means, "coming." So, the season of Advent is not about a birth

that happened long ago as much as it is about the birth that could be coming any minute.

Read the Gospels. Notice that Jesus never once tells the story of his birth, but he very much wants to tell the story of our rebirth [John 3]. That's why it's good to have babies around us. They remind us that God is ready and waiting to do something new in us.

I've been thinking about babies a lot lately, because we've had five born in the congregation in the past year and another one is on the way. Do you think God is trying to tell us something? After all, Jesus came as a baby and taught us a lot of things. Can these babies teach us anything?

For starters, all babies are good at arriving at an unexpected hour and keeping us awake at all hours. Their coming into our lives is good training for Christ's coming. And they can't get stuck in the past because they don't have one. So, they don't have to worry about looking back and being left

behind. Even better: babies have no fear of the future because no one has told them what isn't possible for them.

I wonder: when did someone tell us? When did we stop believing that the world can be a better place and that hunger can be erased, that disease can be cured and poverty does not have to endure, that war will someday cease and all people live in peace? We all started out as babies. We were all born with these possibilities.

It's really too bad that our babies can't talk to us. I bet they could talk some sense into us. Then God wouldn't need to send us prophets to put the hope back into us. The prophet Isaiah wasn't stuck in the past. He was looking forward to the future, to the day when the Lord comes and judges the nations, when the people "shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore." [Isaiah 2:4]

But Isaiah has a very different vision from the one that is wowing the crowds this Christmas. It looks like the top-grossing movie this holiday season is going to be "Catching Fire," from the Hunger Games' series. Instead of listening to an old prophet talk about a peaceable kingdom, our young people are watching a child warrior who is trying to survive in a very violent kingdom. If that weren't enough, there's Ender's Game, another new movie coming out about another child who is being trained for war.

Whatever else we are doing, we are not teaching our kids how to beat swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. These movies teach quite the opposite: that killing is a game, violence is entertainment, and even children have to be prepared to make war forevermore.

I don't know about you, but I want a better world for our babies to be born into, a world where the grownups know that war isn't a game and our hunger has another name. We don't

need one more movie or one more headline about kids killing people. What we need, what we hunger for, is a Messiah who saves people.

Caroline, John, Nathaniel, Ryan and Alexander—every one of you has a beautiful name. And though you can't talk yet, just your being here makes us want to call out Jesus' name. For when you came into the world, we could see the future he promised us. As we watch you growing and changing, we see the hope he has for us. When we see that you are watching us, we see again all the possibilities we've been trained not to see. When you're in bed sleeping, we can even see a world at peace. In the name of Jesus, that world is coming to us, though we don't know the day or the hour. But I have faith that you babies will make sure we're ready for it. Thank God for babies! Amen.