Sermons
from The Church of the Covenant

“There Will Come a Day”
The Reverend Amy Starr Redwine

The Church of the Covenant
Presbyterian Church (USA)
11205 Euclid Avenue
Cleveland, Ohio 44106
CovenantWeb.org
Isaiah 2:1–5
The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.
In days to come
  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;
that he may teach us his ways
  and that we may walk in his paths.’
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
  and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
He shall judge between the nations,
  and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
  and their spears into pruning-hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
  neither shall they learn war any more.
O house of Jacob,
  come, let us walk
  in the light of the Lord!

Romans 13:11–14
Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep.
For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the
day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us
live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and
licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and
make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.
There Will Come a Day
Isaiah 2:1–5
Romans 13:11–14

It was the summer of 1969 and the creators of the children’s television show Sesame Street were just six weeks away from the air date of the first episode. To make sure they had a successful product, the producers created five full-length episodes that would be screened by children. And the results were not what they expected: when the preschoolers watched the episodes they lost interest in the show every time the action shifted from talking puppets to street scenes with only real people.

In making the show, the producers had followed the advice of child psychologists who said they needed to separate the fantasy elements of the show from the real elements. In other words, when there were real human beings on the screen, the talking puppets should be nowhere in sight. The psychologists were worried that mixing fantasy and reality would be misleading to the children watching.

The problem was that the kids who tested the show lost interested during the scenes with human actors. The producers knew the show would never be successful if the attention of its audience waxed and waned like that. So they defied the psychologists. They created puppets that could walk and talk and interact with human beings on the street and they re-shot all the street scenes. And that’s how Big Bird, Oscar the Grouch, and Snuffleupagus were born.¹

Spend any time around young children and it becomes obvious that they have an innate ability to mix fantasy and reality. They accept without question books and movies whose main characters are talking animals or fantastical creatures that could never exist in the so-called “real world.” But there comes a time when they start to question -- what is real? what is pretend? And how can they figure out the difference?

To our adult ears the image Isaiah paints in today’s reading sounds like pure fantasy: people from all over the world and every nation peacefully streaming together up the Lord’s mountain; weapons of war being pounded and reshaped into tools of agriculture; nations setting aside their differences and choosing peace, no

matter how entrenched their conflicts. It’s a lovely idea. But how can we possibly take such a vision seriously? Today is the first day of Advent, the first day of a new church year. Yes, it’s a good time to imagine the possibility of a world at peace, of people choosing love and mercy rather than hate and retribution. But even if we allow ourselves to imagine such a thing, we are well aware that it is little more than a fantasy, and a rather naive one at that.

One of the reasons we have such a hard time imagining that the prophet’s words could actually describe reality is that, other than the music and the relentless commercialism, the season of Advent feels no different than any other time of year. Globally and nationally, things look disastrous. Horrific acts of terrorism barely surprise us anymore, wars and conflicts seem never-ending, ebola has just resurfaced in Africa, our own politicians refuse to work together to solve problems, and environmental disaster threatens our present and future way of life. For many of us, things at home are no better. There is conflict in our families, fear about the future, and grief that always seems to creep into our hearts and take up residence this time of year, just when we are trying to make everything merry and bright.

So it might help to know that when Isaiah first spoke these words to the Israelites, things were equally bleak. The world was filled with violence and war. Israel had been conquered and occupied by the Assyrian empire and pretty much everyone from the king on down was shivering in dread and fear, feeling helpless and hopeless. It is into the darkness of war and uncertainty about the future that Isaiah offers God’s people this glimmer of hope: “They shall beat their swords not ploughshares and their spears into pruning-hooks nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.

Ruby Bridges was one of the first African-American children to integrate the New Orleans public schools. For months, federal marshals had to escort Ruby, every morning and afternoon, through crowds of angry parents hurling insults, racial slurs and violent words at this little girl.

A child psychologist named Robert Coles heard about Ruby and wanted to understand her better, so he spent some time with her and her parents. He also interviewed her teacher, trying to understand how Ruby could have withstood the adversity and abuse thrown at her. This is what her teacher said: “I was standing in the classroom looking out the window. I saw Ruby coming down the street with the federal marshals on both sides of her. The crowd was there shouting as usual. A woman spat at Ruby, but missed. Ruby smiled at her. A man shook his fist at her.
Ruby smiled. And then she walked up the steps, and she stopped and turned around and smiled one more time. You know what she told one of those marshals? She told him she prays for those people, the ones in that mob. She prays for them every night before going to sleep.”

Coles asked Ruby directly about her prayers. “Yes,” Ruby said, “I do pray for them.” “Why?” Coles asked. “Why would you pray for people who are so mean to you and say such bad things about you?” “Because Mama said I should,” Ruby responded. “I go to church. I go to church every Sunday, and we’re told to pray for people, even bad people. Mama says it’s true. My minister says the same thing. ‘We don’t have to worry,’ he says. He came to our house and he says, ‘God is watching over us.’ He says if I forgive the people and smile at them and pray for them, God will keep a good eye on everything and he’ll protect us.”

Coles asked if Ruby thought the minister was right. “Oh, yes,” Ruby said. And then she explained, “I’m sure God knows what is happening. God’s got a lot to worry about, but there’s bad trouble here. God can’t help but notice. He may not do anything right now, but there will come a day, like they say in church, there will come a day. You can count on it. That’s what they say in church.”

There will come a day. That’s what we say here in church because that’s what the Bible promises, here in Isaiah and throughout Scripture. In the birth of Jesus in a tiny, conflicted, impoverished corner of the world, God showed us in human flesh God’s unshakable presence with us, even — and especially — at those very times when things look utterly hopeless. The hope we cling to in the midst of our struggles is not the fantasy of children, but the reality we are called to proclaim, the light in the darkness that we look to at just this time of year. There will come a day.

As we journey deeper into Advent and closer to Christmas we have a choice. We can put up decorations, cook and bake, go to parties, and buy gifts as a means of constructing a fantasy -- if only for this season -- that everything in the world and in our lives is fine. Or we can do all those things in a way that proclaims our deep hope, our firm belief that there will come a day when all the pain and grief and fear and violence in the world is transformed through love into peace and wholeness. Through our actions we can be part of this transformation, just as Ruby was with her smiles and prayers for those who hated her.

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2 Quoted in a sermon entitled “Peace Is More Than a Christmas Wish” by the Rev. Dr. P.C. Ennis, Trinity Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, GA, Dec. 9, 2007.
When Robert Louis Stevenson was a young boy, he used to sit at his room looking out his window. One evening, his mother asked him, “Robert, what are you doing?” He replied, “I’m watching the man knock holes in the darkness.”

His mother came over to see what he was talking about, and outside his window she saw a man going from lamppost to lamppost, lighting them with his torch, which to a young boy looked like knocking holes in the darkness.3

“...now [is] the moment for you to wake from sleep,” Paul writes to the church in Rome, “...lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.” We are called to live — here and now — as if Isaiah’s prophecy and God’s promise in Jesus Christ is not just a fantasy, but a new reality that is already at work on this broken world. This reality calls us to live as though it is already true that the light shining in the darkness cannot be overcome, that hope is real and sustains us through every storm, that peace — true and abiding peace among the worst of enemies — is possible, and that we, through the simplest actions of kindness and mercy, can knock holes in the darkness and let the light of Christ shine into the world.

Living into such a reality begins here, at this table, where we gather together to receive the nourishment God offers us for our work. This is a feast so meager that to say that through this bit of bread and juice God nourishes us sounds like a fantasy. But this is indeed our claim and our hope.

Today we also have an opportunity to receive prayers for healing and wholeness, for ourselves or for someone we know — maybe even for our enemies. We do this as a reminder that we can bring our deepest pain and sorrow to God, because whatever we bring God already knows, already forgives, already accepts, already loves. In the face of all the sorrow and anxiety and despair — in the world and in our lives — we feast, we pray, we live, we act, not in denial and fantasy, but with faith and hope. There will come a day when the fantasy of Emmanuel, God-with-us is our reality...may that day be today. Amen.