

***“The Faithful People”***  
***Isaiah 2:1-4 Matthew 24:36-44***  
***December 2, 2007***

***Come; let us go up to the mountain of the Lord.***

If we turn back just a few verses in Isaiah, we hear another summons;

***“Come now, let us reason together.”*** (V18-20)

The prophet Isaiah proclaimed his message to Judah and to Jerusalem between 742 and 687 B.C. when Judah lived in the shadow of a stronger nation, and the Northern Kingdom was under the control of the Assyrian empire.

Isaiah, in the tradition of Amos, Hosea, and Micah, contemporaries whose works he knew and followed, attacks social injustice as the breakdown between God and his people. (V16, 17)

***Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean;***  
***Remove the evil of your doings***  
***from before my eyes;***  
***Cease to do evil, learn to do good;***  
***Seek justice, correct oppression;***  
***Defend the fatherless, plead for the widow.***

From the days of Isaiah and the prophets, to Jesus, the savior, the faithful people of God will be defined, not by personal pity, but by faithfulness to a God who calls them to beat swords into plowshares, protect the orphan, and learn war no more.

The ‘Social Gospel’ as it was called when I was in Seminary, is not popular in the pew or the pulpit today. Today those in the pew and those in the pulpit are double-minded and do not agree on how to beat swords into plowshares or even if the beating should start.

Dr. Louis Weeks was a few years ahead of me in seminary, and light years ahead of me in everything else. For the past 20 years, he has been President of our seminary, and during that time, as a historian, published research on the double-mindedness of faithful people.

Dr. Weeks declared about Presbyterians, (since only a few of you are Presbyterian, I will only offend a few of you) that ‘governing bodies’ think and act like the national Democratic Party, while the ‘local church’ thinks and acts like the national Republican Party, or as we say, Presbyterians are Republicans at prayer.

If Presbyterians, in the pew and in the pulpit, can not agree on how to beat swords into plowshares, can we dare to reason together and to live with hope?

In the diversity of community and congregation how do we ‘reason’ together?

As in the days of Noah, some are eating, drinking, and marrying, while others are entering the ark. Large ethical problems often result in one of two directions, asceticism or apocalypticism. Problems are denied in a search for personal piety and prosperity, or turned over to the redemptive powers of God. Some are moving on with life, while others are preparing for the next life.

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Today is the Sunday of Hope. Advent is about the coming of the baby Jesus, and the Hope in the second coming of the Son of Man.

*Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.*

As faithful people are we ready?

As faithful people can we agree on the right way to seek justice and to correct oppression? As faithful people can we speak a word of compassion with integrity to the unfaithful?

I think Isaiah and Jesus would tell us:

- The ideal always rides ahead of the real.  
Every social sin situation, especially war and oppression, demands that someone or some group, like Presbyterians, hold high the standards of love and justice.
- Social sin is, at some level, the fruit of those who condemn social sin, like Presbyterians. The effort to eliminate social sin involves the critics in a new social sin, i.e. the assertions of self interest, expressions of moral conceit and acts of hypocrisy.
- Human groups, even Presbyterians, express themselves in lower ethical forms than individuals. No nation can ever be good enough to save another nation. A higher standard of justice may be the highest ideal we can reach.
- Justice, a compound of pessimism and optimism, requires force and coercion, and can only be kept from degenerating into violence by humility and love.
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Hope, in a God who comes to teach us His ways, keeps us faithful in our attempts to establish justice, while we wait and watch.

*Edgell Franklin Pyles, Ph.D.*