

With the emergence of the faith known as Judaism a great step forward occurred in the history of the western world and that was the revealed truth that there is but one God, the creator of the universe, and that the central quality of this God is goodness, indeed, the source of an ethical code that is knit deep into creation.

Prior to the arrival of the Jewish faith, the religious belief of people, particularly in the western world involved multiple gods essentially in competition with each other, gods without an ethical code -- egotistical, moody, unmoved by human suffering. Religion consisted of attempts to appeal to these gods with flattery and bribery – human sacrifices of animals and sometimes even human beings -- in the hope of getting the deity to act in ways beneficial to the people offering the bribery.

But with Abraham and Sarah a new picture of God begins to emerge: one who keeps faithful covenant, a God who calls and blesses a particular people – not just for their own sake -- but as God said to Abraham in order that his descendants would be a blessing to the whole world.

With Moses it was revealed that this God is moved by human suffering and the cries of the oppressed. Up on Mount Sinai, this one God reveals in the Ten Commandments a code of ethical behavior that God requires of human beings. No killing, no stealing, no lying.

The sacred worth of every human being is expressed in the conviction that God created us in God's image – that knit deep into us is the golden rule as an expression of that image. That God's requirements of human beings are not burnt offerings but rather that we do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly in harmony with God's goodness.

The Jewish people will fulfill their destiny to be a blessing to the whole world by revealing the graciousness of God and God's life-giving code of behavior to all people.

And this was a dramatic step forward in human history. But as is the way with all the great world "religions" – the deep truth in which

they are based gets lost and the practices of religions corrupted, becoming too often a means to do precisely the opposite of God's will.

The ancient prophets of Israel such as Isaiah were people who weren't paid professionals in the religious establishment – and as such they could see clearly the corruption. The prophets "listened" for a word from the Lord, and yet if you were listening carefully to how this morning's reading began, you may have noticed that the "word" Isaiah received came to him as something he "saw" – that is, it came to him in visions – in images.

He sees the mountain of the Lord's house – the holy temple in Jerusalem – becoming the highest of all mountains, visible for all the peoples of the earth to see, and the nations of the whole world are inspired to make pilgrimage to this holy mountain for the specific purpose of learning how to walk in God paths of kindness, and justice and humility. And Isaiah sees as a result of this new willingness to learn God's will they learn the things that make for peace, and he sees peoples beating their weapons of war – swords and spears – into agricultural tools to feed hungry people.

In light of this beautiful, hope-filled vision, you might find it surprising to go back and read the chapter that precedes it – chapter 1 – to get a feel for the historical context out of which Isaiah conjured up this vision.

1. The emergence of Judaism – one God – goodness
2. Prior to this, religious belief multiple gods competing, without ethical codes, egotistical, moody, unmoved by human suffering. Sacrifices.
3. Abraham & Sarah, covenant, blessed to be a blessing
4. Moses, cries of the oppressed, Mount Sinai
5. Every human being sacred worth, image of God. Moral order knit into creation

6. Fulfillment of Jewish peoples' destiny, revealing this one God and the moral order this God created. Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly.
7. But as is the way with all the great religions – corruption, practices that lead to the very opposite of God's will
8. The ancient prophets weren't paid professionals. They stood apart, and could see the corruption.
9. Often came in images. "The word seen by Isaiah."
10. Today's lesson what he sees, mount of the house of the Lord. Weapons to agricultural tools.
11. Given the hopeful vision Isaiah saw, you might think he lived in hopeful time.
12. Isaiah 1. Bleak. Murder, thievery, bribery. Vulnerable oppressed, widows and orphans neglected. Sees this in Israel itself.
13. No rose-colored glasses.
14. Most of us look at our world and we see something similar. Our country. Losing the deeper values of its original vision. We can despair.
15. Isaiah is worth listening to. Sees the bad, but he sees a deeper level of reality, hidden beneath the surface.
16. Visions of Isaiah in Advent. Lion and Lamb, little child. Light breaking into darkness. A woman giving birth to a child named "Emmanuel."
17. Next week another prophet: 400 years. Voice crying in the wilderness.
18. Take cues from prophets in season of Advent. Unplug. Candlelight. Listen to really good music. Listen to your dreams. Me and my mountain.

You might think the prophet was living in a time when hopeful signs were abundant in the present moment, but precisely the opposite was true.

In Chapter 1 Isaiah sees the world through God's eyes and is appalled by what he sees. It is a time of extreme moral decay, and it isn't the moral decay of the world beyond Israel's borders that the prophet calls out but rather the moral decay of the people who are supposed to be a blessing to the whole world. He sees thievery, bribery and murder. He sees the vulnerable being oppressed, the widows and orphans being neglected. Evil, not goodness, is what catches the prophet's eye, and destruction coming as a result. Chapter 1 is really, really bleak.

So when Isaiah conjures up this hopeful, peaceful vision God has given him it isn't because he's wearing rose colored glasses. He's sees how bad things have gotten.

But God has allowed Isaiah to see a deeper level reality, one in which goodness still prevails. In the course of Advent we will hear other things the prophet saw: a lion lying down with a lamb, and a little child leading them. Light breaking into darkness. A baby born to a young woman whose name will be Emmanuel – "God is with us."

The prophets could see clearly both the reasons for despair and the deeper sources of hope because he wasn't enmeshed with the world.

Oddly for four hundred years in the history of Judaism no prophets arose who were recognized.

Finally a new prophet did emerge, and we will hear about him next week, a voice crying out in the wilderness. John the Baptist. He too saw the full extent of the corruption; and he too saw a deeper reason for hope emerging in the darkness of the present moment.

So we would do well this Advent to take our cues from the prophets, but it isn't easy. The prophets intentionally resisted the frenzied

pace of their worlds, entering into the silence of the wilderness. They sat in darkness until their eyes adjusted and they could begin to see a bit of light. By embracing the stillness, and the darkness, In such stillness the vision of their souls was restored.

So try to carve out time to unplug this Advent season. To turn off the cell phone, the computer and the TV and sit in candlelight.

And pay attention to your dreams, because that's a place God often speaks through images. My dream of the mountain.

"Be still and know that I am God," says Psalm 46.