

“The Advent Situation”

Isaiah 40:1-11 ¹

One of the recurring themes in science fiction novels and movies of the last century has been that of visitors to earth from other planets, solar systems, or galaxies. On Halloween, 1938, actor Orson Welles read H.G. Wells’ classic novel, *War of the Worlds* on the radio as though it were really happening. The 1898 novel tells the story of a Martian invasion of the United States, and Welles’ reading resulted in widespread panic.

Many of us can remember a time when “unidentified flying objects,” or “UFO’s” were all the rage on television, in the papers, and in newsmagazines. There were many reported sightings, and there was a general feeling that the Air Force was not telling all it knew. In July 1947, there was a highly publicized crash of a supposed UFO near Roswell, New Mexico. The Air Force finally concluded—in 1994—that the crash was an experimental balloon, but Roswell remains a primary location for persons interested in extraterrestrial matters.

Then there’s always “Area 51,” the top secret Air Force base whose existence the CIA only acknowledged in 2013.² Area 51 is a hot topic to this day among UFO conspirators. And to top it all off, E.T. comes to Earth fairly often via *Netflix*.

These questions are very interesting to consider. And the truth of the matter is that it’s difficult to look up at the grandeur of the night sky and not wonder about what—or who—might be out there in the vast expanses of space.

Today is the Second Sunday of Advent, and you might remember from last week’s introduction that “Advent” means “arrival,” or even “visitation.” This morning’s Scripture from Isaiah speaks of such a time of visitation, a time like our own time in many ways. Let’s consider our “Advent Situation” for a little while, beginning with this text.

The prophet was writing to the Jewish exiles in Babylon who were asking themselves two questions as they considered their own situation, far from their homeland where their capital city and the Temple lay in ruins. Here were their questions: “*Has our God been defeated by the gods of Babylon?*” And “*Has our sin separated us from our God forever?*”

The prophet’s answer to these questions, perhaps most familiar to us through Handel’s rendition of them in his oratorio, *The Messiah*, was a firm and resounding “NO!” –

¹ *Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. ² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.*

³ *A voice cries: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. ⁵ And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” ³*

Into this situation of gloom and despair, the prophet spoke words of Comfort and of Hope. Part of the background to this prophecy is found in the prophecy of Ezekiel, who was himself one of the exiles in Babylon. Ezekiel had a vision of the glory of God departing from the Temple far

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on December 8, 2019.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Area_51

³ This conversation appears to take place in “the Divine Council.” See also Deuteronomy 32:8-9; 1 Kings 22:19-24; Job 1; Psalm 82, and others.

away in Jerusalem before it was destroyed, and then, years later, Ezekiel had another vision foretelling the return of God's glory to the city and to the rebuilt Temple.⁴

Isaiah's vision foretells that same return of God's presence and glory to the city and to the Temple. One of my favorite parts of this vision is this: *Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain* (v. 4). Let me try to help you see what I imagine when I read this

I use a program called *BitGym* on my elliptical exercise machine. *BitGym* allows me to follow hundreds of paths around the world while I exercise, which is really quite delightful. When the program opens, the splash screen is the one you see here, with the words, "Loading *BitGym* World." As the program loads, the mountains on the splash screen are generated as I watch. They rise up magically out of a plain.

MineCraft worlds work the same way, as do many other digital worlds. This is also the general impression that C. S. Lewis gives of God's Creation of the realm of Narnia in *The Chronicles of Narnia*.⁵ In that "creation," Aslan, the Christ figure, *sings* the mountains and rivers, and everything else, into being (rather than *speaking* them into being as in Genesis).

You know the Story: ¹ *In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.* ² *The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.* ³ *And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light* (Genesis 1:1-3).

That's what I imagine when I consider Isaiah's words. God, at whose Word everything that is came to be, simply speaks, and the mountains bow down and the valleys rise up to prepare the Way for the King!

The point, of course, is that nothing in heaven or on earth can prevent God's coming to rescue and to redeem God's people in their time of trouble. We need such a word ourselves, do we not? Our world is in a Mess. Our nation is in a Mess. Our lives are in a Mess; and if we're going to get out of the Mess we're in, God is going to have to do it.

So as we sit here this morning, we may very well have the same questions those exiles had long ago: "Is our God actually able to get us out of this mess?" And "Even if God is able to get us out, does God still care enough about us, sinners that we are, to deliver us?"

To put this another way, if God is not transcendent—that is, above, beyond, and Other than our world—then God is not *able* to help us. And if God is not immanent—present within our world *with* us—then God doesn't really understand or *care* about our situation.

The last two verses of this morning's text answer both of these questions. Verse 10 focuses on God's power to help us, and verse 11 focuses on God's tender care for us:

¹⁰ *Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.* ¹¹ *He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.*

God comes to us with Might & Gentleness; or, to put that another way,

⁴ Ezekiel chapters 10 and 43.

⁵ This takes place in *The Magician's Nephew*.

14 the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel [God, with us]. . . . 6 For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. 7 Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this (Isaiah 7:14, 9:6-7).

There is a Real Extra-Terrestrial, my friends, and His Name is Wonderful. His Name is Immanuel. His Name is Yeshua. His Name is Jesus! The Good News at CHRISTmas is that we really DO live in “a visited world”!

Beyond the idea that **we live in a visited world**, there is a second characteristic of our Advent Situation. As we read, listen to, and watch the news, we cannot avoid the conclusion that **we live in a confused and stressed-out world**.

On the one hand, there are surely sufficient signs of God’s Kingdom present even now for us to know that it is Real. We experience moments of transforming worship, of profound hope, of uncompromising integrity, of spiritual victory. But the present moment also contains a gnawing awareness of moral failure, of hopelessness, despair, and evil.

While it’s wonderful to imagine angelic voices singing “Peace on Earth!” once again, we must also face daily headlines about Afghanistan, Darfur, Yemen, and shootings all over our own land. The confusion in this world also touches us.

Our nation’s seemingly unending wars are destroying our young, even as continuing acts of terror and destruction in malls, sanctuaries and military bases are scarring our souls. These things seem very, very real. The news about “Peace on Earth” seems long, long ago and far, far away. There may be occasional breakthroughs, but Real Peace will have to wait.

Maybe the Christ-child was just ahead of His time. Perhaps His time is still not yet, for history seems to run on and on without Him. This God-thing will just have to wait until we have finished our semesters, our shopping, our football games, and our annual reports.

This is, after all, the twenty-first century. The world is not like it was back then. Ours is a 24/7/365 world; a global village; a complex and sophisticated . . . and dangerous place. Even the toys our children will receive as gifts this Christmas are beyond the wildest imaginations of the greatest minds of a hundred years ago, much less two thousand years ago.

We would miss the CHRISTmas Story if it were not told, for it is the customary background of the season, but we don’t have time to take it very seriously. Don’t talk to us about Good News, we think. All around us people are broken and bleeding, frightened, angry, and dying. Good news to us is mostly no news at all. Give us a break! We don’t want to hear any more about starvation in Yemen, explosions in Syria, or mass shootings here at home. We’ll eventually find a “Christmas spirit” somewhere . . . *just leave us alone!*

But the Joy of Advent, the Joy of this Promised Arrival, is not a superficial joy. It can’t be whipped up artificially. This is not a neatly prepackaged, carefully polished, lithium-powered techno-joy. This Joy cannot be had by simply taking a day off for a party, singing carols until we feel happy, or going shopping until all the gifts are bought. Those things are not the Joy of Advent.

The Joy of Advent is a Joy sufficient for life on this side of September 11. Maybe our brightly-colored candles are not the best symbol for this Joy. Candles are too easily blown out.

Maybe the best symbol for the Joy of Advent is a storm lantern. Such a lantern is strong, and it can withstand those forces that extinguish candles so easily.

Third, not only do we live in a world that has been visited and in a world that is stressed-out. **We also live in a waiting world.** How often have we said it, "Hurry up . . . and wait!" We wait and wait and wait. We wait for birthdays; drivers' licenses; engagements; wedding ceremonies; anniversaries; new jobs; promotions; children; opening nights; elevators; arriving planes. We wait endlessly. We wait for Peace and Hope and Love and Salvation.

We are consistently looking forward, looking backward, and avoiding the PRESENT. Have we not learned? We live in a visited world! The Messiah who is coming has come. And this Messiah does not intend for us to wait passively for the future, but rather intends for us to work with Him to bring in the Kingdom of God . . . *today!*

Waiting through Advent is filled with the knowledge that Jesus will come because He has already come. The Messiah who came will come again. Indeed, He does come, even into our chaos and confusion. He is here, now.

Yes, we live in a visited world. We live in a stressed-out world. We live in a waiting world. And finally, **we are persons who live in the world-as-it-is with Hope.** Jesus was not a man ahead of His time. All times are His Time. His Presence is not seasonal. It is eternal. Jesus doesn't sugarcoat the evil in our lives or in our world like Christmas candy that is too-soon gone. Jesus invades our complexity and agony and death with Order, Meaning, Peace, and Hope.

Our world is waiting . . . waiting for a Peace that never seems to come. Our world needs this Christ-child. We need Him. What you and I need this Advent Season is a faith that can sustain us in a post-9/11 world. We need a vision of God's redeeming power that causes us to know in our hearts that God's possibilities are always greater than we dare to imagine. God is creating a New Kingdom, and Jesus IS coming again . . . not as a baby, but as an Eternal King.

It was an ordinary night, "*and [the shepherds] were about their ordinary tasks when an angel appeared . . . and said, 'Don't be afraid! I bring you good news of great joy for everyone! The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born tonight in Bethlehem, the city of David!'*" (Luke 2:10b-11).

Though the shepherds were terrified, the Messiah's arrival was not unexpected. The shepherds expected the Messiah to come. They just didn't expect him TODAY! Don't we often do the same thing? We believe in our hearts that Jesus is coming again for a Second Advent, as He promised. We look forward to that day, when we will see Him as He is, and when we will know as fully as we are known . . . we just aren't looking for that to happen *today.* But it might.

Yes, ours is a visited world, visited not only by the messengers of God, but by very God Himself! The Advent Situation is that Promise has become Fulfillment. **The Word has become flesh. Christ has been born!**

Amen, and Amen.