

“Many peoples shall come...”
 Reading from the New Testament: Romans 13:11-14
 Reading from the Old Testament: Isaiah 2:1-5

Cameroon is presently at risk of civil war. For 37 years one man, President Paul Biya, has ruled this Central African state that is reportedly oil-rich and staggeringly corrupt. “When democracy swept across Africa after the cold war ended, he called it a ‘distasteful passing fetish’.” And yet, “a secession struggle rages in its English-speaking regions. Government forces are burning villages, shooting young men and sexually assaulting women. The conflict has killed thousands and forced more than 500,000 people from their homes.” (*The Economist*)

Meanwhile, northwest of Cameroon in Burkina Faso, the UN reports that the country could become ‘another Syria,’ as extremist violence overwhelms the military in this fragile semi-democracy that is also reeling from the growing climate crisis in Africa’s Sahel region. A third of the country is now included in the conflict zone, and tragically like Cameroon, 500,000 people have been forced from their homes. A similar crisis is currently emerging in the neighboring nations of Mali and Niger.

At the same time across the Atlantic in Bolivia, “The self-declared ‘presidency’ of Jeanine Áñez has revived the old oligarchy’s racial hatred and the barbaric practice of Indian killing, the collective punishment of the nation’s Indigenous majority for daring to defy a centuries-old racial order of apartheid and oppression. Since the ousting of Bolivia’s first Indigenous president Evo Morales, security forces have carried out at least two massacres of Indigenous people protesting the military coup.” (Nick Estes, *The Guardian*)

Pop over to Haiti where a non-functioning government and violent protests have resulted in fuel scarcity, financial turmoil, soaring food prices, and crumbling health facilities to the extent that outside assistance is inaccessible.

In western China, well over a million ethnic Uighurs have been placed in re-education camps that resurrect fears and hints of the concentration camps of WWII. The hope of democracy in Myanmar has been overshadowed by the persecution of ethnic Rohingyas. At the same time, the polarities in our own land threaten the very institutions that sustain us as the lure of power crowds out the desire to serve.

From Chile to the Ukraine, Venezuela to Egypt, Lebanon to Capitol Hill, it is clear that the nations have not made much progress toward beating their swords into plowshares, much less learning the ways of the Lord. The cynic would see Isaiah's vision as laughable. Yet, to the eyes of faith, Isaiah's vision is the fuel to sustain us through any present struggles and confront hatred with love.

First, it is important to note that Isaiah ben Amoz should not in any way be confused with Don Quixote. His vision is neither the impossible dream nor the fraud of a political campaign or the prosperity gospel. He clearly understood his context and comprehended both the barriers to the peaceable kingdom and the motivations that drove the powers and principalities into conflict. The age of Isaiah was no more and no less corrupted and corruptible, discordant and violent than this age in which we live. Yes, we have air-conditioning and better dental care, but sin is still pretty much universal.

This particular portion of Isaiah's prophecy is set in the southern Semitic kingdom of Judah during the reign of King Ahaz (*otherwise known as Jehoahaz. Again, not that notable, but I just like saying it – Jehoahaz*). In 2 Kings, Ahaz is described as follows: "Ahaz was twenty

years old when he began to reign; he reigned sixteen years in Jerusalem. He did not do what was right in the sight of the Lord his God ... but he walked in the way of the kings of Israel. He even made his son pass through fire, according to the abominable practices of the nations whom the Lord drove out before the people of Israel.” Nice guy.

Well, things in Ahaz’s neighborhood were pretty chaotic. “His kingdom was invaded by Pekah, king of Israel, and Rezin, king of Syria, in an effort to force him into an alliance with them against the powerful state of Assyria. Acting against the counsel of the prophet Isaiah, Ahaz appealed for aid to Tiglath-pileser III, king of Assyria, to repel the invaders. Assyria defeated Syria and Israel, and Ahaz presented himself as a vassal to the Assyrian king. Not only was Judah’s political situation unimproved but Assyria exacted a heavy tribute and Assyrian gods were introduced into the Temple at Jerusalem.” (*Britannica.com*) That was just not going to look good on Ahaz’s resume. Yet, it all has a familiar tenor when perusing today’s headlines.

Isaiah sees very clearly what is happening, and before he offers his vision of a peaceable future, he opens up a can of rebuke on Ahaz and the nobles of Judah. “Ah, sinful nation, people laden with iniquity,

offspring who do evil, children who deal corruptly, who have forsaken the Lord, who have despised the Holy One of Israel ... Trample my courts no more ... Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the orphan, and the widow's cause does not come before them.” In other words, God is watching, and God is ... not happy!

So, just a cursory look back to Isaiah’s opening salvo leaves one dizzied by the question of how Isaiah gets from chapter 1 to chapter 2? How does one move from intractable chaos to hope, from military alliances to united nations, from rampant corruption to a shared communal desire to learn the ways of the Lord.

Consider the contrast. Chapter 1: “People laden with iniquity, offspring who do evil, children who deal corruptly, who have forsaken the Lord.” Chapter 2: “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’.” Isaiah offers two radically different portraits. In one portrait we see a world and a people, both self-serving and idolatrous, reaping the harvest of corruption as neighbors neglect neighbors, princes seek not the health

of the whole but the prosperity and power of the few. The consequences include the deterioration of relationships and communities along with the collapse of the structures and principles that hold a people together.

In the second portrait self-seeking, grasping for power and property, and fostering injustice are all supplanted by invitational generosity and concern not only for the self, not only for the tribe, but for all. “All the nations shall stream to” the mountain of the Lord’s house. “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’.”

In a way, the difference between the two portraits, the difference between chaos and community, comes down to a matter of attention. Researcher Daniel Simons conducted a classic experiment in attention blindness. The study is popularly called *the invisible gorilla*.

“The idea behind the experiment is simple. People tend to think—particularly in this secular age—that seeing is believing. For instance, you’d assume that if you were watching people walking in a circle passing a basketball, you’d notice if some dude in a gorilla suit

randomly walked through the scene, waving his arms and jumping up and down. That can't be missed. Yet half the participants in Simons' experiment miss it. People assume at rates over 90 percent that they are not the kind of people to miss such an obvious, right-in-front-of-your-face event—and yet 50 percent do.

“The experiment shows that if people are looking for a gorilla, they see a gorilla. But if your attention is elsewhere—for instance, on counting the number of times the basketball is passed—at least half will miss the interloper. That's just how Simons' experiment is set up. Two groups of people, some in white shirts and others in black, pass a basketball between them as they move. The observer is asked to count how many times people in the white shirts touch the ball. Seconds into the sequence, the gorilla comes walking through. Afterward, half the observers are shocked when asked if they saw a gorilla. Most assume there was no such thing and that those who say they saw a gorilla are either liars or crazy.” (Andrew Root, *The Christian Century*)

Andrew Root, a Minnesota seminary professor, notes that, Deep-seated assumptions about how to conceive and represent the world—what philosopher Charles Taylor calls “social imaginaries”—inform and

frame what we give our attention to. We can and do miss hugely obvious realities when our attention is on something else.

“In his book *A Secular Age*, Taylor argues that in the modern era our attention has been drawn away from what our ancestors thought was obvious: that a personal God acts and moves in the world ... Taylor suggests instead that we’ve acquired a unique observation blindness. It’s not that we’ve given up an untenable belief but that new imaginaries have drawn our attention away from divine action and toward something else. New forms of attention make us unable to see what was once obvious.” (Andrew Root, *The Christian Century*)

It’s like the difference between looking up into the clear night sky in the city and doing the same in the country, the difference between seeing a crescent moon along with a star or two and seeing a sky bursting with infinite lights and distinct galaxies. You have to clear out the haze in order to see a universe.

In a way that is our task here, to clear out the haze to explore the divine. Or, put another way, you have to take your eyes off the basketball to see the gorilla, and our task here is to pull your eyes away

from what the world tells you is most important long enough to see signs of eternity right here in your lives, in our community, across the nations. 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."

When Jesus caught the curious looking in to see what he was up to, you know what Jesus did? He said, "Come and see." Similarly, Paul invites us, "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."

Isaiah wasn't a dreamer. Isaiah was a witness, knowing that even in the midst of chaos and brokenness, there is a narrative of hope that rises from a God who is present and active in the world and a resurrected Lord, who, in spite of any evidence to the contrary, holds the future. It is seen in both the ordinary and extraordinary, the mundane and the courageous as neighbors near and far away seek to follow the One who gave his life for all. Compassion where there could be condemnation. Mercy where there could be bitterness. Attention to

moral consequences in decision making rather than obsessing over profit margins and poll numbers. Self-giving where there used to be only self-seeking. It's happening here. It's happening in your neighborhood. It's happening around the globe in spite of wars and rumors of wars.

Remember the violence in Cameroon? There is a Presbyterian mission co-worker, Jaff Bamenjo, Cameroon directing a program called Refulfa that has been working with communities since 2005 to understand what kind of intervention will respond to communities' needs, avoid creating dependence and will be sustainable," Amidst today's violence, the home of Jaff's aunt was burned to the ground by the military and the husband of his younger sister was brutally murdered for no reason other than in a war zone everyone is a target. And yet, Jaff Bamenjo continues his work to bring light to the darkness. Jaff says, "As an individual, I feel helpless, but I know I have strength because of the many people in the world who do care. It is unacceptable to stay quiet, stand by and watch..." (*Presbyterian Mission Agency*)

To what are we paying attention? To whom are we giving our lives? For what purpose are we living? 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." Amen