The beginning of Advent often feels more like an invitation to continue reflecting on the final judgement themes of last Sunday’s Feast of Christ the King than it does an anticipation of the joyous birth of Jesus we will celebrate at Christmas. Jesus’ warning in Matthew’s Gospel about our not knowing when “the Son of Man will come” certainly doesn’t support the countdown to Christmas evoked by Advent calendars. Similarly, today’s passage from Romans in which we are counseled to “make no provision for the desires of the flesh” seems particularly challenged by the piles of Christmas cookies showing up in workplace snack rooms and the furious purchasing of gifts to give. Whatever will we do if we are caught busily deck ing our halls and listening to silver bells when Jesus comes in glory?

I have all but given up trying to keep Advent as my family did when I was a child. I loved those quiet, reflective times. I loved anticipating fun, sweet things to come. Yes, I still make an Advent wreath and I light the purple and rose candles in their turn. But, I also put on my red sweater and go to Christmas parties when I feel I shouldn’t. But, not to go before Christmas is to miss how Christmas is celebrated in most of the United States today. It may be celebrated the same way in other parts of the world. I don’t know. I haven’t looked into it. But, candidly, after the final mass on Christmas Day, Christmas carols sound forced. The congregation has already moved on. Any why wouldn’t they? They (We) have celebrated Christmas since Thanksgiving night and are tired of it. Bring on the peace and quiet, until New Year’s Eve anyway.

While admitting that our liturgical calendar and our society’s calendar are in conflict with each other, perhaps it is Isaiah who provides the bridge for us. All of the December merry-making surely opens people’s hearts to longed-for peace symbolized by swords being beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. Who can train for war while singing O Holy Night?

Through our celebrations are we not joining a procession of sisters and brothers streaming towards God’s house situated on that highest mountain? In that celebratory parade generosity overflows. People of good will reach out to friends and neighbors, to homeless people and those living on the margins. There seems to be a super-abundance in those weeks from Thanksgiving to Christmas. And isn’t that how it will be for all of God’s people when those plowshares and pruning hooks are put to work so that the land will produce enough good fruits for all God’s people?

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