

Shocked by Advent (Isaiah 2:1-5; Matthew 24:36-44)

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In all my years of pastoral ministry, I always found the arrival of the first Sunday of Advent disruptive. Even as a strong "J" on the Myers-Briggs, I never felt like I was prepared for its arrival. Advent arrives following the longest "season" in the liturgical calendar, the stretch of ordinary Sundays. And the first Sunday's readings catch us off guard. We are shocked by the outrageousness of Isaiah's prophecy: "They shall beat their swords into plough shares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." And we are not prepared to be judged by Matthew that this is no time for "eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage."

Last summer, I attended a presentation by a Chinese American scientist at an event sponsored by San Francisco's Asian Law Caucus. The event was held in Chinatown, where I grew up. Xiaoxing Xi, a Pennsylvania physics professor and naturalized U.S. citizen, described what happened to his family in the middle of the night in the spring of 2015. Awakened by the pounding on the front door, the startled Professor Xi let in federal agents. They charged in with guns drawn and led the father of two away in handcuffs while his terrified family, still in their pajamas, watched in shock and confusion.

The Department of Justice charged Xi with passing sensitive technology--used in his superconductor research--to China. Months later, the government dropped its charges.

After a string of cases in which Chinese American scientists have been accused of spying for China, Xi worries the pattern will continue, devastating more families like his own. In a petition at Scientists Not Spies, Xi's daughter, now working at the Asian Law Caucus, calls on the Obama administration to cease unjust criminal prosecutions of Asian Americans, to apologize to those wrongfully charged, and to investigate whether there is an underlying racial bias at the DOJ.

I couldn't help but recall the history of the first Chinese in this country. In 1882, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, prohibiting Chinese workers from entering the United States. Chinese workers thus earned the dubious distinction of being the first national group prohibited from immigrating to the U.S. In 1942, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, resulting in the forced relocation and incarceration people of Japanese ancestry. Sixty-two percent of the internees were United States citizens.

In our current climate, the question is can it happen again? We witnessed and were inspired by the achievements of the civil rights movement in the 60s, breaking down the walls of segregation and registering African Americans to vote. So why are shouts of "Black Lives Matter" necessary? How can a nation of immigrants be so enamored with wall-building and not bridge-building?

We are living in times when these are ordinary, pressing questions. The First Sunday of Advent is about to burst onto the scene. How does the word of God address these questions?