

Readings - Advent 1

Jeremiah 33:14-16

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Luke 21: 25-36

Tenacious Hope

Introduction to Scripture

David Lose describes it well when he says “Advent is a season that messes with our sense of time.” While we typically live with a fairly linear view of time – one event coming after another – the church's liturgical and lectionary calendar is cyclical – patterns of events repeating themselves. For this reason, the church year that begins in Advent puts in front of us passages about the end of history before moving in later weeks to prepare us for the coming of the Christ child and the dawn of a new age.¹

That is why we begin Advent with the second half of an apocalyptic address by Jesus along with other apocalyptic passages through out the biblical text.

It is apocalyptic talk. When things are especially bad for a group of people who feel persecuted and small, they express their hope for deliverance and their trust in the God who is really in charge of everything by speaking in large, dramatic terms.

Our first reading in Jeremiah is set in the context of a people in exile. For nearly 400 years decedents of David had occupied the throne of Judah just as God had promised. But the Babylonians had destroyed Davids city, burned Solomon’s temple and took Davids heirs into exile. The promises of God seemed to have come to an end. But the people are called to live in hope. All might seem lost but God is still faithful. The house of David might be cut down but God is able to bring life out of death. Even from these people a righteous branch will spring up. Last week we read in the book of Daniel, the same kind of language expressed the people's hope for rescue from the evil tyrant Antiochus IV Epiphanes, almost two hundred years before Jesus. Today we read again of a belief that God will conquer the mighty and bring justice to the oppressed nations.

God will up-end the power of something as mighty as the empire of Rome by doing big things in big ways, even bringing down the heavenly bodies from their courses? Dianne Bergant reminds us of the chaos that reigned before God brought order, back in the beginning of things, in creation. Metaphorical images like the moon and stars falling out of the sky, she writes, portray "the end of one age and the birth of another. Apocalyptic imagery frequently is employed in describing the entrance of God onto the stage of world history" (*Preaching the New Lectionary Year B*). When we recall that the sun was the symbol of Rome itself, while the moon and the stars represented the empire's client kings clustered around it, we can better understand that, when Luke is talking about the "powers of the heavens" being shaken, it's a kind of code: "It is

¹ Lose, David - workingpreacher.org

not the end of the cosmos, as Mark has it, but the shaking of the earthly principalities and powers that is referenced here,"

Not surprisingly, there's a tension in the commentaries on this text. Some scholars emphasize the cosmic dimensions of the upheaval Jesus foretells: "This biblical passage is not just a metaphor about death, individual or collective," Paul Scott Wilson writes. "It is talking about the eschaton, the reality of the end of time...." Even for us who have grown up with the threat of nuclear holocaust over our lives, "the end of time" is the ultimately frightening thought. Or perhaps not: "God is not a spoiled child who is about to have a tantrum and destroy creation," Wilson continues. "Rather, the eschaton should be regarded as the time of fulfillment of all of God's promises....God sets a limit on all injustice and sin. It will not continue. Its days are numbered" (*The Lectionary Commentary*). If we trust the One who makes the promises, we can indeed stand up and raise our heads then in anticipation of the redemption at hand (v. 28).

Tenacious Hope

We could easily make this advent season about a time of waiting and resting. We could focus on the wreath and the pretty lights. We could sit back and remind ourselves that this is the time when we are to attempt to calm ourselves in the midst of chaos and I don't think we would be all wrong. In fact I do think we need to find ways to do those things. But advent waiting is not a passive waiting - advent holds anticipation, preparation, hope for something new. Bergant writes "The Advent way of life does not necessarily require unusual behavior on our part, but it calls us to live the usual unusally well. It affects the everyday events of life; it directs the way we interact with people; it informs the attitudes that color our judgments and motivations. It is as ordinary as the birth of a child; it is as extraordinary as the revelation of God."

Advent is the time when we fully engage in the anticipation of God's reign on earth. It is the time when our eyes are to be open to the signs of God's work. It is the time when we too are called to participate in the bringing in of the kingdom as we prepare the world for the reign of truth and light.

For many of us the apocalyptic passages of the day speak nothing to us because few of us are even sure what another coming of Jesus even means. What are we waiting for? What are we searching for? Barabara Brown Taylor with Jesus directs us back to the simple things. "Look at the fig tree Jesus says." "Perhaps the people "have not done that for awhile. They may have been focused on abstract things, like judgment or salvation, or on dramatic things, like earthquakes and plagues. By directing their attention to a sprouting tree, Jesus let them know that they did not have to work so hard, that God was speaking to them in the most ordinary events of their lives."

Taylor wonders about the way we use the time we have (it's really all we have, she says) while we're waiting for Jesus to return. Be alert, yes, but "not so you will know when to grab your crash helmet and head for the basement, but so you will know when the kingdom is near. So you

will not miss God when God comes” (Apocalyptic Figs” in Bread of Angels). Every time God comes.

Jeremiah speaks the same reminder to us - don't give up, hold onto hope, look and see that God is here and trust that God will make things right. “A righteous branch will spring up” Jeremiah speaks to people in a time like our own; a time when many are experiencing great loss. Loss of jobs, of stability, of health. Many are in a time of fear and hopelessness but be alert God is at work “A righteous branch will spring up” new life will come. The prophet Jeremiah who speaks these words of hope is not a rose-coloured glasses kind of prophet - in fact this is the same prophet who is imprisoned by his own government for prophesying too much doom and gloom and raising despair. If Jeremiah can hope - so can we.

Jeremiah speaks not at a time when angels are flying through the air proclaiming the truth and coming of a glorious kingdom. He speaks at a time when this righteous branch is nowhere to be seen. Kathryn Schifferdecker shares the words of Jeremiah “A righteous branch will spring up” is a word of tenacious hope spoken to counteract all of the life sapping, despair inducing evidence to the contrary and that is it's power.²

“The end-time, Borg and Crossan write, "is not about some mass immigration from a doomed world to a blessed heaven. Rather, it is about the end of this era of war and violence, injustice, and oppression. It is about the earth's transformation, not about its devastation. It is about a world of justice and peace." What is particularly helpful is their articulation of the different ways we understand such an eschatology and our role in it: is God going to act alone to transform the earth (and all we can do is wait and pray), or do we collaborate with God "in bringing about the world promised by Christmas"? Or do we ignore the whole question of transformation of the earth and just concentrate on our own personal, private salvation? "The Christmas stories," they write, "are not about a spectacular series of miraculous events that happened in the past that we are to believe in for the sake of going to heaven. Rather, they are about God's passion, God's dream, for a transformed earth" (*The First Christmas* is invaluable for the preacher in this season).”³

Barney Hawkins shares “Mother Teresa told a story about the time she came down with a terrible fever. Her temperature climbed and she became delirious. She had a vision of being at the gates of heaven and telling St. Peter that she was ready to pass from this world to the next. But St. Peter refused her entry into the high vault of heaven. Mother Teresa asked why. Peter replied: "Because there are no slums in heaven.”⁴

² Schifferdecker, Kathryn. Assistant Professor of OT luther seminary. Workingpreacher.org (Nov. 29,2009)

³ IBID

⁴ Hawkins, Barney Rev. Dr. J “Advent waiting and working for the kingdom” Nov. 29, 2009 textweek.com

The season of Advent is not best spent on waiting for the baby to come so that we can celebrate and life will go on the same. Advent calls us to anticipation - to tenacious a hope that should spark in us a desire to participate the bringing about of justice in our world. "Peter turned Mother Teresa back from heaven's gate because there was work for her left on earth. Her vocation was in the slums of earth not in the glory of heaven."

So it is with us. Advent is a season of waiting in this world, not any other. It's a season of darkness before the light of Christ appears. It is a season that draws us near to God in a way that we might see The Holy even in the dark. It's a time that calls us to be alert and awake to the working of the spirit presence. It's a time when we as Christians are called to recognize that our faith is a whole lot more about earth than it is about a future heaven.

Advent tells us a somewhat hard truth. We are called to live in this world just the way it is. So my question is no matter what you think heaven is like, or what you believe the second coming is all about how should we spend our time waiting to see?

I believe the best way to wait is to work towards setting the best possible place for arrival. To live in this waiting advent life time creating and living out justice and righteousness for the entire world. To remind ourselves that the prophets and teachers before us who lived in hope did so actively. Jeremiah, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King Jr. they all believed that God had more for this world and that we as God's children are called to participate in the bringing in of God's kindom.

4According to Hawkins, "In a recent editorial in the New York Times, U2's Bono asserted that America holds the keys to solving the three greatest threats we face on this planet: extreme poverty, extreme ideology and extreme climate change. All of us would hope to escape these "signs." They do cause us to fear. What Bono has chosen to do is help us see the signs of darkness. Advent is a time of awakening and so it perhaps it should be a season of identifying the many causes of extreme poverty throughout our world and even in our own nation. Perhaps it should be a time when we recognize those in our world who have been orphaned and widowed and forgotten. Perhaps it is a time to notice how alike the poor women in are world are like Mary the bearer of Jesus himself. What if Advent was a time when we sought to help the poorest of the poor, when we sought to help 'revolutionize health and agriculture for the world.'

What if while we light our Advent candles this year we thought about putting others first. What if in our waiting for the Christ Child we spent a little more time listening, or better yet even hearing from those with whom we disagree. Preparing for Jesus might mean opening our hearts and minds a little more.

Hawkins suggests that perhaps Luke's Gospel lines up even more closely with the destruction of the earth we are creating. "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars--and on earth distress." "Advent is a time in our Church to read the signs as carefully as we read the Bible or light the candles of the Advent wreath. Time is running out--and that is the message of Advent and why the waiting is painful. Advent has within it always: "fear and foreboding." No one has waited for a child without some anxiety, some fear--and yes foreboding. God's Church waits each year for the Lord of all with fear and foreboding--for we know in our hearts that with the coming of the Christ Child we have work to do, threats to meet and dreams to make real."⁵

This Advent as we hold on to the promise of the coming of a better world, let us participate in bringing that about as we work, play, worship, love, laugh, cry and be together in this community of faith.

Amen

⁵ Hawkins