

End Times, Begin Times
Jeremiah 33: 14 – 16, Luke 21: 25 – 36
Makemie Presbyterian Church
November 29, 2009 First Sunday of Advent

Jeremiah 33: 14 -16

¹⁴The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel & the house of Judah. ¹⁵In those days & at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; & he shall execute justice & righteousness in the land. ¹⁶In those days Judah will be saved & Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: “The Lord is our righteousness.”

Luke 21: 25 – 36

²⁵“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves.

²⁶People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. ²⁸Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

²⁹Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; ³⁰as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that

summer is already near. ³¹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³²Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. ³³Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. ³⁴“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, ³⁵like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

This ends the reading.

I hope your Thanksgiving was lovely. Over at the manse we ate turkey & all the fixings. On Saturday, during the Oklahoma – Oklahoma State game I asked, “Who wants a turkey sandwich?”

Jaxon said, “I have seen the end of the turkey. Please, no more turkey.”

I don’t know at your houses about how things end. But this morning we’re going to discuss how things end so something new might begin.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. In my experience, many in the Church are of two minds about Advent. We like some of the symbols associated with this season. We celebrate the arrival of the Advent wreath with its four candles. We look excitedly for the appearance of evergreen boughs, trees, & poinsettias around our homes & churches as we edge closer & closer to Christmas. Yet, as much as we anticipate these markers of Advent, there are other signs of the season that hit jarring notes in us. For some, the first out-of-tune tone is struck when the liturgical color shifts to purple here at the tail end of November. Then, of course, there are the Advent hymns with their sober melodies and sad words. “And ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here” feels far-removed from “Joy to the World.”

And, the hymns underline the biblical texts for Advent. It is a shock to our holiday spirits when each year the Common Lectionary-the orderly set of readings shared by many churches throughout the world-kicks off the season of Advent with a reading from the gospels known as "the little apocalypse." It is a passage in which Jesus speaks of the end of the world. Standing in the temple not long before his crucifixion, Jesus speaks of roaring seas & nations in distress. He describes a scene in which a great earthquake shakes all of creation-a cataclysm so terrifying that people are fainting out of fear. It's almost cruel to plunge those of us who are humming "Jingle Bell Rock" into readings that describe the end of the world. So why does the church seem so out of step when it comes to Advent? Can't we make our way toward Christmas without all the doom & gloom? Can't we have signs of the apocalypse that are a little more light hearted? For example, a sign of the apocalypse is: Tom Cruise is talking about a Top Gun II, or on Monday you're back at work trying to do a little Christmas shopping & the internet goes down, or the new bacon cheese donut burger.

Now as Advent begins, Christians are asked to set their clocks ahead, way ahead. Once there, we are asked to contemplate the end of time & the promised return of Christ. And as you just heard Ted read, the imagery of these end time texts is stark, horrifying, bigger than life.

Luke speaks of sweeping destruction-natural disasters & humanitarian catastrophe. Who could possibly think that evoking these frightening images would be a good way to commence a journey toward Christmas? The whole thing seems like the spiteful act of a few grinch-like writers about God who are bent on introducing cold air & smoke into our cozy holiday homes. Do we really need as we head into Advent yet again, to be reminded that it is about the spirituality of emptiness, of enough-ness, of stripped-down fullness of soul?

Dickens' classic holiday tale A Christmas Carol is a story replete with these images of Advent. Dickens offers scathing commentary on the treatment of the poor & harsh words for his society's failure to educate the neediest children; compounding the problem of poverty. The images that Dickens uses to convey his criticism are most unpleasant. At one point he describes craven, disturbed children with sunken cheeks clinging to the shins of the Ghost of Christmas Present. Although powerful, rarely do these most difficult bits of Dickens' masterpiece make it into our holiday productions. We have a tendency to edit the apocalyptic from our lives.

Yet, Luke tells us that in the midst of the terrible circumstances that these texts describe, our posture is to be not fearful, but watchful. Because

Luke says there is more to see than death & destruction. In the midst of the apocalypse, God dwells. Christ is at the center of the chaos of this text.

And doesn't our reading this morning seem incredibly pertinent for our times. Apocalyptic stories look & sound a lot like the images that we see on the evening news. In this, they are shocking. But they do not stop there, the biblical images that we study at the beginning of Advent are included in our holy texts to give us hope -- not hope based on ignoring the problems of the world, but hope grounded in a God who stands in the midst of these times offering us all redemption. In this, the clear assertion of Luke's Gospel is that while the powers of evil are real & terrible, they are not permanent. The only thing that endures to the very end is God's vision for humanity -- a vision articulated by the prophets of old (curmudgeons like Jeremiah) who spoke words of justice & peace & restoration for the world.

For those of us who are convinced that the world has no business ending in earthquakes, smoke & fire when we just watched Santa arrive safely at Macy's, this passage encourages us to be faithful in the midst of troubled times & places where God is already at work. This is the snapshot that we can carry in our pockets this Advent. In these pictures we can see images of a God who is with us a God who beckons us to enter the fray

with hope-filled hearts as we make our way -- all the way from the end of time to the manger in Bethlehem -- to the process of beginning again.

So what does all this end time imagery have to do with us? After all this is the Sunday of Advent where we lit the candle of hope; and it is hope that in our human life we can begin the process of being healed, of coming beyond our own woundedness, that we can overcome what holds us back from a life fully lived; the inability to begin again. To pick up the pieces and begin again may itself be life's greatest project. Doesn't our world end when we won't realize the implication that personal healing is part of the natural rhythm of life?

That we must all go through it or run the risk of never being whole because we have never known what it is to be wounded but healed, to be struck down but survive? Suffering, after all, is surely not for its own sake. With the coming of Advent we are offered a time to heal; important to the healthy, essential to the strong, waiting its moment to be born in Bethlehem. Healing eludes us, however, at every level of the personal & the political spectrum. People die & leave us aching. Old hurts still sear. Around us, like ghosts stalking in the night, our world erupts in tiny sores of violence & brutality while we watch helpless on television screens.

Inside ourselves we feel the pain; outside ourselves we wear a calloused look. We have learned to yawn our way through suffering in volumes unimaginable to generations before us. What we cannot resolve we repress. What we cannot control, we constrain. But we do not heal. Too often, the pain remains embedded in the human psyche, raw & inflamed, waiting only to vent itself again. We build up our defenses, personal & public, higher & higher, we do not heal; we simply contain the diseases of the soul under thin veneers of pious virtue as we lie in wait to take vengeance on those who were vengeful toward us.

One of the most health-conscious cultures on earth, we spend huge sums of money on physical well-being all the time being battered in soul. In a society driven by immensely unhealthy motives of achievement & power, profit & personal acceptance, we find ourselves so bent on winning we are surely doomed to fail. We run faster every day & accomplish less despite it. Worse, we sit down in the midst of the pain around us & quit. We lose friends & lose energy & lose hope. We lose the family or the race or the security we had taken for granted. We find in its place a cold, stiff copy of the life we once knew, full of hurt & rupture, tormented forever by a bruised heart.

The work fails, the relationship ends, the future clouds, the sand shifts. We come to the point where we would rather die inside than try again to reshape what would not bend.

The question is why? Why do we hold pain to the breast like a fox under a toga that eats our insides out even as we smile. "I'm fine," we say when we do not mean it. "Nothing's wrong," we say When we seethe with hurt. "That's life," we snap when life has struck so hard we would prefer no life at all. "Just ignore it," we say when hurt drives out joy, stampedes trust, consumes our hearts & saps our every thought. Then, because we have not attended to the wounds in ourselves, we have no capacity for the pain of others. Because we ourselves have too often refused to heal we cannot heal others. It is a fearsome carousel this anesthetizing of the human soul. It jades & blocks & makes us paranoid. It cools us & distances us & leaves us hard of heart. Those who swallow a stone become a stone, we learn.

The question is, how, once battered, shall we learn to live again? Who has not known what it is to be hurt by either hate or neglect, who has not known what it is to be targeted for scorn or rejection or jealousy or misinterpretation?

What is the process, then, of coming to wholeness again, once the bonds of human community have been broken. What repairs the breaking of a golden cord?

There are two obstacles to being healed. The first lies in our attachment to the pain. We cannot heal ourselves of the pains to which we cling. We have to want to be healed. We cannot wear injustice like a red-badge of courage & hope to rise from it. Even before we are vindicated, even before restitution comes—if it ever comes—we ourselves must move beyond it, outside of it, despite it. Healing depends on our wanting to be well. I may not forget the blows I have suffered in life but I must not choose to live under their power forever. Most of all, I must not choose to imprison myself in my own pain. Whatever has mutilated us—the betrayal, the dishonesty, the mockery, the broken promises—there is more to life than that. The first step of healing, then, is to find new joy for myself to tide me through the terror of the abandonment. It is time to get a new life instead of to mourn the old one. When the beating is over, there is nothing to do but to get up & go on, in a different direction to be sure, but on, definitely on.

The final step in healing is a matter of time itself. To honor the fact that Advent is a time for healing surely means that we come to peace with

the notion that healing does not come before its time, that healing takes time, that time itself is a healer who comes slowly bringing new life & new wisdom in its wake. It is the spiritual power of the healing process in each of us that goes unnoted & so unappreciated. We fly the hurts—ignore them & dismiss them & detest them & often miss the values of the healing time. It is in the healing process that we come to a new appreciation of life that leads us to Advent.

The coming of this holy baby tells us & is surely right: in every life there is a time to begin again. Why? Because it is only when we decide to heal ourselves of whatever it is that is tying us to the past that we can begin to live again, to live anew. The old life ends & born is the life renewed in Christ, the Lord of Righteousness. Christ who brings new life to earth. Amen.