

1st Sunday of Advent
Sermon 11.28.21

Jeremiah 33:14-16

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ¹⁵ In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ¹⁶ In those days Judah will be saved and 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

"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. ²⁶ People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷ Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. ²⁸ Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." ²⁹ Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; ³⁰ as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. ³¹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³² Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. ³³ Heaven 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 does not catch you unexpectedly, ³⁵ like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶ Be 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. (351)

Happy New Year!

That's what this is—this Sunday, the first Sunday of the new church year. Now's when we begin again this adventure that is the liturgical year. This year, following the gospel of Luke, is the third in the three-year cycle—and, yes, it should be an adventure, beginning as it does with Advent.

It's a funny season, Advent. Four weeks long, it's a short season, second shortest only to the season of Christmas, which is twelve days long. But it encompasses lots of time, Advent does, and in reverse order oddly enough.

It begins with a look toward the end. Jesus here is in the final days of his life and he's looking toward a future revelation, perhaps even the final revelation. A coming of the so-called Son of Man amidst signs (in nature and in politics) and amidst the people who are all full of fear and foreboding, all these inhere with the promise of redemption now drawn near, that all that seems meaningless or wasteful might be brought into full meaning or purpose, the kingdom of God near, very near.

Strange: it's as if times of trouble, wherein history and even nature seem to break down, coincide with an opportunity to become free of old forms, to have new expectations for what could

be, and what we're meant to make to be. Every crisis is an opportunity, the saying goes. So, throw up your hands, in desperation, in expectation, in exultation. Now's the time!

But which is it, I wonder? About this coinciding of crisis with redemption, does the one cause the other or does the other cause the one? Does the coming of redemption cause crisis or does crisis open a way for coming redemption? Does calling into question matters long settled and deeming the value of ways long established bring crisis, or does crisis open a chance for the work of redemption, things falling apart so nothing is a given, everything is newly open to be decided upon or against?

That's the first week of Advent. Then, for the 2nd and 3rd weeks, we find ourselves a few years back in time, with the emergence of John the Baptizer, when Jesus was already grown and would soon seek baptism from his cousin.

The final Sunday of the season will have us where we might have expected to be all along, with Mary, who was pregnant with Jesus, now visiting her cousin Elizabeth who was pregnant with John—actually getting ready for actual Christmas!

Advent: it's not what you might expect, and it can be more than a little disorienting.

Add to that this further wrinkle in time, that Jesus is imagined as foretelling a set of cataclysmic events that would happen later in the century when he lived, but Luke's writing of Jesus having foretold these he did amidst that same set of cataclysmic events.

"Luke" likely wrote this book in or around the year 85—which is to say fifty years or so after Jesus' death and resurrection, forty years or so after Paul traveled the Mediterranean world to establish the church, and twenty years or so after Rome finally declared war on the Jews (which would have included Jewish-Christians), attacked the city of Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple, and ushered in a mindset of the sort Jesus suspected the people would adopt: what on earth is going on? How shall we understand this terrible falling apart? And how shall we endure as a people of hope? The historical moment Luke wrote from is also the moment Luke imagined Jesus foretelling. And maybe Jesus did foretell this very thing. Or maybe Luke found himself amidst cataclysm and realized anew the timelessness of Jesus' promise as made in his very presence among us, his promise that it's amidst cataclysm when God's faithfulness is especially to be felt and known.

For none of this will last. Jesus could say that in the year 30 and have it be true. And Luke could say it in the year 80 and have it be true. We can say it in the year 2021 and have it be true, indeed perhaps truer than we've ever felt in all our lifetimes: none of this is forever, none of this is established as never to be moved. None of this will last—neither the state we're each in personally

nor the state we're all in collectively. None of this will stand forever, but God. But the Lord. So, when it all comes apart, or yet begins its undoing, what will hold us will be God, the Lord.

If this comes as troubling news, it says a lot about what has held you in your movement through time. Your life has worked for the most part; our lives have worked for the most. We've had it pretty good.

If it comes as promising news to you, that's another matter. Maybe much of what's followed you in the living of your days, dogged you, *hounded* you in the living of your days, has been one disaster after another. Disaster has a way of following itself, doubling down, until finally something breaks.

I recently had a conversation with a couple whose refrain was about what this country is coming to. They really couldn't imagine. One thing was clear, though: they were deeply worried, deeply sad, utterly confounded. A feeling a lot of us have, I suppose, it sprung in them an urge to make America great again, as they seemed really, truly bereft of all these new trends that were a departure from the settled situation they'd likely known and enjoyed. Very good looking, very well dressed, retired now church-going people of faith, their only response to everything they perceived going on in this world was dismayed wordlessness or the rant their grown son disallowed them to unfurl.

I have to say, it surprised me to hear this from people of faith—since it seems one of the cornerstones of Christianity is the goad to move on, the exhortation to look ahead and to anticipate the coming one. Church is a deeply and wonderfully conservative project: what we do together is what we've done together for two thousand years. We hear the word, interpret the word, and break the bread together, same as it ever was, only in ever evolving forms. But it is also a relentlessly progressive affair: the reason we do all this is to remember and to hope, to hear again that we're to keep watch for the coming one, for the coming one. The promise is yet to be. The orientation is toward the future which has yet to be revealed. The glory is on the horizon, and it will be here, if mostly in its coming, if only lastly in its having arrived.

Look! Look! Let go what was. It's not coming back. History has never given us a time when we could make it again. It's always presenting anew. And it is good news—or it can be if we're willing to let go what is no longer. So, keep hope, and keep watch.

I wanted to preach an Advent sermon while the Thanksgiving turkey was still scrapes on our plates.

The Negro spiritual, *Wade in the Water*: I can't remember when I first heard it, but it comes to me a lot as if it's always been a part of my life. First recorded in 1901, it long predates that. I imagine, anyway. It was likely sung into existence around the same time the underground railroad was running, in the first half of the 19th century. Certainly, its themes are of exodus to freedom: "Wade in the water. Wade in the water, children. Wade in the water. God's gonna trouble the water."

Imagine Moses leading the people into the sea, leading them from slavery to freedom, or, more accurately, from servitude to the Pharaoh, exploitative, cruel, to servitude to the Lord, loving, life-giving. Imagine also the call of baptism, wading into the Jordan or whatever body of water is near to receive new life in Jesus' name.

What had always puzzled me about it, though, white girl that I've always been when it comes to this song, was the claim that God's gonna *trouble* the water. Why trouble it? What not separate it, as in the story of the exodus, a way cleared through the sea? Or why not simply present it, reveal it, as in baptism? Or why not calm it, as in so many miracles of Jesus, calming stormy seas to see the disciples safe to the other side? But no, the song is insistent, God's gonna *trouble* the waters. This is even one of the earliest names of the song. In James W. Johnson's 1926 *The book of American Negro spirituals*, the song is entitled, "God's A-gwineter Trouble De Water."

What did the enslaved know that I couldn't figure out? To me, trouble just sounds like trouble.

To the coming one, though, to the one to arrive on the horizon, so to enter into the living of our days, trouble is simply a part of it. It is either an effect of the coming, for to introduce anything new, especially something so radically new, is to trouble matters; or it is the cause for the coming, as crisis presents an opportunity, the passing away of the old presenting a chance for the new, an opening, a clearing.

One thing's certain, we have no shortage of crises these days. A new variant of this still novel virus is the next wave of trouble coming to us in tides. And it's hard to see anything promising in it, which is true for most of the troubles of these days, anything promising in it at all, anything to inspire hope. I really do often think I'll spend the whole of my lifetime amidst an unraveling of old forms while what's new is yet to arrive, should it ever even arrive.

This is no less true when it comes to church. The old forms of church, the waning days of which it seems I grew up amidst, seem only hardly to hold, which was true even before COVID came along and broke the backs of many congregations, stifled the vocational call of many pastors.

Things are troubling on so grand and pervasive a scale that only hope can come to bear, only faith can withstand, if even that.

But we are here in the practice of hope, of faith. Nothing the church has ever done or said is rightly to be in service of the status quo. The power of the church has never about the state of things, has always been about the passing nature of things, and the steadfast promise of a God who loves and who saves, who redeems and makes whole even a midst so much of history that seems hopeless, wasteful, bereft.

The season ahead, so swift about its purpose, is but weeks long; and we have much to do. Something new is being born in our midst, and it is good, for it is love. So, get ready. Get ready. And we might not recognize it at first—recognize it for what it is, this new chance at new life. But it's coming, so watch out.

Thanks be to God.