

Between the “Now” and the “Not Yet”

Third Sunday of Advent

Luke 21:25-36 Jeremiah 33:14-16
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Last Sunday, we had the privilege of experiencing a magnificent music program during worship. It felt a bit like a pre-Christmas Eve service, and a bit of a respite from the challenging theme of Advent. But we're back at it today. Our overarching theme for Advent this year is about **journeying through the wilderness as our way of preparation for Christmas Day**. Therefore, two Sundays ago on the First Sunday of Advent we jumped ahead in the assigned lectionary Gospel readings to begin with Luke's story of John the Baptist coming out from the wilderness to call us to bear good fruit as witness to our repentance. John reveals that we prepare the way of the Lord – the ways of the kin-dom of God – through acts of generosity, unselfishness, fairness, and justice. As we noticed, however, since John's wilderness message of repentance sounds more like the season of Lent, I ended that sermon with the challenge to put a little Lent into your Advent this year.

With that as our starting off place for the season of Advent this year, we now jump back to the lectionary Gospel reading assigned for the First Sunday in Advent. It's even more dramatic than John's call to repentance. **Just when you wished we'd start talking about the baby Jesus and singing favorite Christmas carols, the lectionary forces us to face the end of the world, at least as we know it.**

The gospel writer has Jesus warn us about catastrophic events in the heavens and the earth, accompanied by fear and foreboding, that will announce “the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.” There's a term for this kind of literature, it's called **apocalyptic**. And the subject of apocalyptic literature in the Bible mostly deals with **eschatology**. That's the fancy theological term for the **study of the end times, the ultimate destiny of the created order.**

What, you may be thinking, does this have to do with preparing us Christmas? For most of the history of Christianity, the church has assigned a **twofold message to the season of Advent**. First, it was designed as a season to prepares us for remembering and celebrating Christ's **first coming as the baby Jesus born in Bethlehem over 2000 years ago**. That's called the Incarnation. And, thankfully, the lectionary will address that next week. Yet, Advent also seeks to direct our hearts and minds to **await Christ's second coming at the end of time**. Whether taken literally or not, and progressives generally do not, the scripture passages assigned by the lectionary for the four Sundays of Advent are meant to remind Christians that **we are living “between the times” – the time between Jesus' first coming and Christ's final return. Or, as many theologians prefer to state it, Advent celebrates the tension between the now and the not yet.** The Christ-event extends across these two “comings.”

It is important to note that most modern biblical scholars believe that the gospel writers thought that Jesus' second coming was imminent – within their lifetime. That being the case, these authors understandably warned believers to be on guard and

alert at all times. Strangely, however, all this is meant as a **message of hope**. Let's look at how that is. First of all, we are warned that amid the destruction and devastation that are every taking place in the world, we are to keep ourselves grounded and centered in God. In the midst of the craziness that screams out of the daily headlines, we are to recognize the Presence of Christ – God's Sacred Presence – in the world around us, and within us. So, **what works best for you to keep yourself grounded** (besides a good chardonnay)? **What helps you get centered and stay focused in God?**

This morning's Old Testament reading also contains a message of hope. The prophet Jeremiah addresses God's people who find themselves in exile in Babylon. Separated from their homeland, and subjugated by a foreign enemy, Jeremiah proclaims that their time of exile is coming to an end, and that God envisions a new future of hope, promise, and restoration. In the words of the prophet:

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. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. (Jeremiah 33: 15-16)

What does that have to say to us today? Leonora Tubbs Tisdale suggests:

Advent is a time for acknowledging the exilic conditions of life for those persons in the world who live in situations of injustice, who experience unrighteous hands of power over them. Whether we are talking about victims of war, domestic violence, or human trafficking, whether we are envisioning people who feel the heel of the economic oppressor on their backs or those who bear the weight of political oppression on their heads, Advent is a time for proclaiming the promises of God.

The tree stump that looks to be dead and incapable of any new growth will, under the miraculous working of God, send forth a new shoot – a tiny baby – who will continue the Davidic line. Under his rule there will be no more oppression or subjugation, for God will inaugurate a new day and a new reign in which the peoples of the earth will live in freedom and safety and peace.

Have you, do you ever experience times when you've felt like you're in exile, separated from that which brings healing and wholeness? If so, look for signs of hope and opportunities of restoration during this wilderness journey through Advent. And, instead of thinking of the End Times in capital letters, as in the end of the world as we know it, perhaps we can **focus on those endings in our own lives**, and in our community of faith. Perhaps, instead of focusing on the Apocalypse with a capital letter, we can **attend to the apocalyptic events in our daily lives**. Perhaps there is an encouraging word for each of us as we navigate the in-between times in our lives, those times between the 'now' and the 'not yet'.

The poems being read this year during the lighting of the Advent Wreath each week are written by **Jan Richardson**, an artist, writer, retreat leader, and ordained minister in the United Methodist Church. Reflecting on today's gospel passage, a year after the sudden death of her husband, she reflects:

The ending of one's personal world is not the same, I know, as The End of the World that Jesus describes here. Yet the first Sunday of Advent invites us to recognize that these endings are connected; that the **Christ who will return at the end of time somehow inhabits each ending we experience in this life.**

Every year, Advent calls us to practice the apocalypse: to look for the presence of Christ who enters into our every loss, who comes to us in the midst of devastation, who gathers us up when our world has shattered, and who offers the healing that is a foretaste of the wholeness he is working to bring about not only at the end of time but also in this time, in this place.

As we continue our wilderness journey through this season of Advent, I will close this sermon by asking the closing question asked by Jan Richardson. **"Is there something in your life that is ending? How might you look for the presence of Christ who comes to you in that place?"**

May God bless, guide, strengthen, and comfort us as we, individually and as a community of faith, navigate the living of life between the 'now' and the 'not yet.'

Blessings and Amen.