

## **THE GIFTS OF CHRISTMAS: The Gift of Prophecy**

**TEXT:** Jeremiah 33:14-16 and Luke 21:25-36

“Behold, the days are coming”, says Jeremiah. And indeed they are “And there will be signs” says Luke. And indeed there are. Jeremiah is talking about the birth of Christ. Luke is looking to Christ’s second coming. Interesting lections for the First Sunday of Advent.

So, let’s start with a quick look at what Jeremiah says. The picture he paints for us is one of assurance in the midst of chaos – certainly a message that resonates today. At the time Jeremiah spoke, Israel was in the midst of mounting national panic. They were threatened by the Assyrian hoards on one hand, or they could be torn apart by the Egyptians attempting to establish a military blockade against the Assyrian threat. It was in that painful situation that Jeremiah brought his message. Good prophets always hold out a vision for people to cling to, even when its meaning is not yet able to be grasped. Jeremiah proclaimed both warnings and assurance, but with the ultimate message that the people should be alert, maintain clear vision and allow God’s sure and ultimate promise of redemption to keep all these things in holy perspective.

What a perfect setting for the beginning of Advent. We currently live in a society that is tossed about between barbaric acts of violence, hate filled rhetoric, and fear mongering. But Jeremiah’s message calls us to reflect on the faithfulness of God in the past as God worked in Israel’s history, especially as that faithfulness worked out in the coming of Jesus the Christ. It also calls us to hold the present realities of life within the cradle of expectation. That does not mean that we should call people to abandon the present for some utopian dream. But it calls us to affirm that the present is not the final chapter. The world that we experience, with all of its sin and pain and misery, is not God’s final word. New days are surely coming!

Then Luke tells us about waiting, anticipating, keeping watch. The first Sunday of Advent signals the start of another round in our ecclesial journey. It offers hope that

the reign of God will be experienced in its fullness. The season offers us an opportunity to do some soul searching, as well as helping us prepare for what is to come. It is a season of expectation, which means that we need to be on the alert. Jesus warns us against being caught up in the things of this world. Focus your attention on what God is about to do. But, wait a minute! Aren't we anticipating the first Advent? Aren't we looking for the arrival of the Christ child?

Luke is telling us about Jesus' words of warning about the end times. "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 waters". Hummm, that sounds familiar. "People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud" with power and great glory. This does not sound like Christmas!

At the center of this reading is the parable of the fig tree. This parable is not what we normally think of as "parable". There really isn't a story, per se, which is what we might expect – no little old lady searching for coins, no sons, or servants, or stewards. There isn't a point (or skewer) that is the trademark of the parable hidden in the palm of Jesus' hand as he tells it, where the reader is caught (and stuck) at the end.

This "parable" is really more of an observation and a warning. It heralds the coming of the Son of Man, calling us to have eyes to see the signs, and the good sense to be ready.

How can we not be ready? The Black Friday shoppers have heard the threatening lyrics, "You better not shout! You better not cry! You better not pout, I'm telling you why! Santa Claus is coming to town". But today we hear Jesus' words that are also imperatives of keeping watch: "Stand up and raise your heads! Look at the fig tree. Be on your guard! Be alert!" It is perhaps an absurd parallel between the song and the gospel, since the stakes are so disproportionate between being on Santa's "naughty or

nice list” and the fate of the world. But there is an uncanny similarity: Keep watch; he is coming; you will be accountable.

The apocalyptic waiting of the Advent season, then, is torn between avoiding rudimentary distractions and living with desperate faithfulness in a world where God is at work. And as disparate as those two options sound, they describe perfectly the dynamics of Advent 2018. In a world where environmental destruction is heating the planet and bringing threats of drought or flood or fire to humanity, we are invited to “Tech the halls” with new and improved gadgets. In a world facing the worst refugee crisis of the modern era, we are invited to focus on a “war on Christmas” over insignificant things like red coffee cups or which neighbor is overusing the power grid with his Christmas light display. In a world where terror chills the heart in one moment, pumpkin spice warms the body in the next.

The challenge for us in this Advent season is to work for a season that is filled with genuinely good tidings. It is a call to keep us alert, not distracted by lists and jingles, but be called to give desperate attention to what it means that God is at work in the world, even in the most despairing of events.

What is important to note here is that while this is a message for Advent, in the context of Jesus’ ministry these words come near the end. He is facing the cross. The days are drawing to a close. The great conflagration will take place not on some battlefield called Armageddon, but on the cross. Death will lose the battle, for life reigns supreme in the resurrection.

The message of Advent is that of alertness. Be on the alert. Be aware. Don’t engage in activities that will cloud our vision of God’s work in the world – no dissipation or drunkenness. Don’t let the worries of this life keep us from seeing what God is doing.

This week there are countries still in stages of conflict whether an unstable peace exists or that fragile peace has been compromised with one another or internally.

Extreme poverty still claims the lives of millions of children, while our country puts children fleeing persecution, poverty and conflicts in detention, wrenching them from the security of their parents.

We continue to hear that the changing of our climate and our human participation in that change is hurtling humanity towards as yet not fully known horrors. Every moment in which we live, people are encountering the horror and confusion of the so-called “end times”. Some of them are Christians, some do not know Christ, yet they are all loved children of God.

It is in the context of the suffering and the confusing that we look beyond our own capacities as human beings and at the God who raised Jesus from the dead and so declared that the endings we see and experience are not and will not be the final word.

We are an Advent people, called to live expectantly and so to live expressing our hope for God’s future by living as if it is already here, not dictated to be our present sufferings but informed by the vision of what God has in store for all things.

We are called to live in the present, yet with the expectation that in some concrete way that we cannot yet envision, God will work God’s own restoration of all things. “Days are surely coming”, says Jeremiah. “There will be signs”, says Luke. These are calls not only to expectation, but to faith in God. Amen