

Preparing the Way 1:
Prophetic Expectations

from the pulpit of
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December 2, 2018

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 and the house of Judah. ¹⁵In 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. ¹⁶In 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

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.”

Larry and I had a wonderful Thanksgiving vacation in Boston with our young adult sons. We had not been to Boston since we ourselves were young adults. James moved there a year ago, so we drove over, and Winston flew up from Chapel Hill. We walked most of the Freedom Trail through the American Revolution, toured a few museums, drove out to Concord and Walden Pond and tried to imagine what it was like for Henry David Thoreau to live and write in that small wooded space.

Over the course of those several days together, we had our family's inevitable Thanksgiving weekend conversation: What do you want for Christmas? James wants a season ski pass in order to spend the winter weekends on the slopes. Winston wants to attend the famed Swannanoa Gathering, a series of American folk art workshops, during Banjo Week next summer. Since third grade, Winston's musical interests have transitioned from trumpet, to French Horn to electric bass, and now he's taught himself how to play the banjo. I'm thrilled that Banjo Week will give him opportunity to play with and to learn from the pros. I'm also thrilled that we can support our sons' interests by giving these experiences for Christmas presents – rather than stuff that gets wrapped and placed under the tree.

However, in Boston last week, I think I surprised even them when I said with a fair amount of nostalgia, “I am kind of sad I can no longer make Christmas magic for you anymore.” It seems the older we get, the more Christmas loses a sense of its magical enchantment, but what is lost can be replaced with something more lasting, more authentic, more meaningful than any momentary Christmas morning surprise.

The season of Advent sets us on a journey with the hopeful expectation that God is doing a new thing. The Bible helps us prepare for the fulfilment of ancient promises by inviting us to live toward God's new world order of justice, righteousness and peace. This weary old world of ours, with its trembling violence and fear and uncertainty, is somehow being redeemed by the gracious promises and the power of the Living God.

Nothing puts us in that mindset of hopeful yearning quite like the readings appointed for the First Sunday of Advent. Even as the Christmas lights go up in stores and on our homes, we who worship Jesus Christ must talk about the foreboding glimpses of a future on the edge of mystery found in the apocalyptic texts of Holy Scripture. The prophet Jeremiah speaks to a scattered and desolate people who struggled to stay faithful to God. They were a people who, in their turbulent times, began to wander after lesser Gods. Most of the book is series of laments and difficult words about judgement.

Our text is taken from a section within the larger whole which is called the Book of Comfort. Jeremiah points to a righteous branch to grow up among the people of God in their time of desolation, a leader who will execute justice and righteousness in the land. Our Christian tradition has long seen the fulfilment of that promise in the person of Jesus. Then, toward the end of his life on earth, Jesus himself assumes the cadence of the prophets of old, warning of fainting and fear and foreboding.

What are we supposed to do with these prophetic expectations? What are they intended to evoke in us? Should we faint with fear? Or raise our heads awaiting some world-ending vision to appear? “Be on guard,” Jesus says, “Be alert” to the signs in the heavens and on the earth, that God is coming in full glory; for the Kingdom of God is drawing near.

Although there is great joy in making Christmas magic, there is a much more profound underpinning to this season than mere nostalgic enchantment. These prophetic texts invite us to live with hope that God is indeed coming. Even when the stuff of our earthly lives may obscure the vision, the righteousness and justice of God are on the way. The voices of Jeremiah and Jesus are intended to tune our hearts to live with hopeful expectation. Jesus’ parable instructs us: In the midst of our tumultuous world, the purposes of God may seem as invisible as fruit on a dead fig tree, but in due time new life will emerge, the old glorious visions will be fulfilled, the promises of God will ring true. Any words of fear and foreboding are warning signals for us to wake up and to begin living into those ancient promises before they are fulfilled.

In his book, *Prophetic Imagination*, biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann writes: “The prophet engages in futuring fantasy. The prophet does not ask if the vision can be implemented, for questions of implementation are of no consequence until the vision can be imagined. The imagination must come before implementation.” He goes on to say that: Prophetic imagination is a danger to the earthly king... to the powers of this world. Thus every totalitarian regime is frightened of the artist who imagines alternative realities.¹ It is the artistic vocation of the prophet to keep alive the ministry of imagination, to keep on conjuring and proposing futures alternative to the single one the earthly king wants which is – of course – to keep himself in power.

So here on the First Sunday of Advent, before we get all sentimental and nostalgic again about the baby in Bethlehem... we are invited to imagine a world of justice and righteousness and redemption. How might that change the way we celebrate Christmas? How might that change the ways we go about our daily lives?

My good friend Jill Duffield gave me an idea of how transformative this ancient word can be. Jill is the Editor of the *Presbyterian Outlook*, a job that has her flying around the country to report on the work of the church. On election night, just last month, she was flying home and waiting for her connecting flight to Virginia in the bustling Atlanta airport. She sat alone eating dinner, watching the pundits predict the election outcomes, seeing the “breaking news” banner when the polls closed. She admits – that night - she looked forward to being in the air again and oblivious to the election outcomes if only for an hour or so. She wondered if her hope for a less politically divided life together bordered on delusional.

Behind her sat a woman, bound for Minnesota, working on her laptop. A young man in a janitor’s uniform came to empty the trash can adjacent to the woman’s table. She struck up a conversation with him. She asked him if he was in school. No, he had to work. He had a baby on the way. “How

¹Walter Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, p. 40.

exciting,” she exclaimed. “You have no idea how much your heart will expand.” She had an 18-month-old at home, she said. They chatted and eventually she got the young man’s name and address so that she could send him baby clothes her son had outgrown. “Nothing fancy,” she said. “But good for every day.” He thanked her, told her to have a safe flight. She wished him well and they went back to their respective work.

Jill got up to go to her gate but not before stopping to thank the lady with the Minnesota accent. She told her she was moved by her kindness. The woman said, “We need to be kind to each other.” Jill wrote about it saying: “As the Breaking News boomed about red and blue races, I agreed. Neither earth nor heaven shook, nothing went dark, but that small exchange brought about a seismic shift in my attitude. Their shared humanity over impending life bolstered my faith and gave me a glimpse of love and unity that is too often unseen. It gave me hope that redemption is not as far away as I feared.”²

You know, to be perfectly honest with you, between now and Christmas morning, I’ll figure out how to wrap up a ski pass and Banjo Week in a little Christmas magic for our sons. But I am also going to try to figure out how to push some of my need for nostalgic enchantment aside – in order to make a little more room for acts of kindness, for glimpses of righteousness, for works of justice – that point us to the Redemption of God’s kingdom drawing near.

AMEN.

² Jill Duffield, *Presbyterian Outlook* weekly Lectionary Blog, 11/27/18.