

Sunday November 29, 2015

Like other prophetic books, Jeremiah begins by locating the prophet in a specific historical setting. We learn that Jeremiah was born to a priestly family just northeast of Jerusalem and that his prophetic activity began in the thirteenth year of King Josiah's reign and continued until the second conquest of Jerusalem. What is unique about this book is the amount of information that is given regarding the interactions of Jeremiah with his fellow Judeans. This particular reading takes place during the siege of Jerusalem by the Babylonians and contains a message of hope to those who are enduring under the siege. Jeremiah is trusting in God to make things right again for the people, even though the people themselves might not have much hope.

Jeremiah 33: 14-16

¹⁴“Watch for this: The time is coming’—God’s Decree—‘when I will keep the promise I made to the families of Israel and Judah. ¹⁵When that time comes, I will make a fresh and true shoot sprout from the David-Tree. He will run this country honestly and fairly. He will set things right. ¹⁶That’s when Judah will be secure and Jerusalem live in safety. The motto for the city will be, “God Has Set Things Right for Us.” ¹⁴“Watch for this: The time is coming’—God’s Decree—‘when I will keep the promise I made to the families of Israel and Judah¹⁵When that time comes, I will make a fresh and true shoot sprout from the David-. He will run this country honestly and fairly. He will set things right. ¹⁶That’s when Judah will be secure and Jerusalem live in safety. The motto for the city will be, “God Has Set Things Right for Us.”]

The reading from Luke is set with Jesus speaking in the temple itself to the “all the people.” This is a perfect setting for a discourse predicting the destruction of this exact temple. The destruction of the temple that was described in this discourse is as it happened in 66-72 C.E. when Roman armies destroyed Jerusalem. The particular section this morning speaks to the aftermath of the coming and the signs that things are about to change. Much like we know summer is here when the buds appear on the trees, Jesus is telling those who are listening that they must be prepared for the coming of salvation and faith is that which will allow one to stand tall, rather than cower in fear.

Luke 21: 25-36

²⁵“It will seem like all hell has broken loose—sun, moon, stars, earth, sea, ²⁶in an uproar and everyone all over the world in a panic, the wind knocked out of them by the threat of doom, the powers-that-be quaking. ²⁷“And then—then!—they’ll see the Son of Man welcomed in grand style—a glorious welcome! ²⁸When all this starts to happen, up on your feet. Stand tall with your heads high. Help is on the way!” ²⁹He told them a story. “Look at a fig tree. Any tree for that matter. ³⁰When the leaves begin to show, one look tells you that summer is right around the corner. ³¹The same

here—when you see these things happen, you know God’s kingdom is about here. ³²Don’t brush this off: I’m not just saying this for some future generation, but for this one, too—these things will happen. ³³Sky and earth will wear out; my words won’t wear out.

³⁴“But be on your guard. Don’t let the sharp edge of your expectation get dulled by parties and drinking and shopping. Otherwise, that Day is going to take you by complete surprise, spring on you suddenly like a trap, ³⁵for it’s going to come on everyone, everywhere, at once. ³⁶So, whatever you do, don’t go to sleep at the switch. Pray constantly that you will have the strength and wits to make it through everything that’s coming and end up on your feet before the Son of Man.”

Sermon – Sunday November 29th, 2015 – First Sunday of Advent

Our reading from Luke this morning is, what I would consider to be, a rather strange reading for the first Sunday of Advent. Generally when we think of Advent we immediately jump ahead to Christmas and all that that means for us as Christians. But I think if we do that we miss a lot of what we might want to really think about as we approach that special day.

Last week was the “Reign of Christ” Sunday and Sharon spoke about the idea that the “Reign of Christ” is to announce the coming of a new kingdom of God and really what a better way to come to Advent then with that in mind.

Going back to our reading from Luke we see a reading that, for many people, seems to be apocalyptic speaking about the end of the world, or so it seems. What I find interesting these days is that much of what we understand around the so called “apocalyptic” is brought to us by one of two sources. We have all seen those people, in movies and television shows that are standing and proclaiming the end of the world, and according to them it is near. We also have those fringe religious groups who in the last number of years have been sure to the actual date of the end of the world.

And now my pop culture reference. It seems that many of the novels for older youth are set in a post-apocalyptic world. We have the Hunger Games which take place after a great war where people are segregated into different zones based on the production or manufacture of a specific product. This society is thrown into a great upheaval as the people revolt. We have the Divergent movies, Divergent and Insurgent, where after some type of devastation people in Chicago, which we assume is the only city left, are segregated into factions and from this comes those who don’t fit into a specific category and are therefore seen as being divergent and are a threat to society. Then we have the Maze Runner series which takes place after a plague has run through the population of the world, but the scientists find that there are a group of young people who are immune to this disease and so they are tested, within this maze, and once they escape they are continually tested over and over again to see if they truly are immune and can become the saviors of humanity.

This is not to mention all of the other movies out there that have a similar theme around the end of the world and I suppose who can blame us. We look at many things that are happening in the world today and it is difficult for us not to be a bit despondent. I think at times we truly wonder if it is the end of the world.

Yet I wonder if we might be putting the proverbial cart before the horse, especially when looking at the reading from Luke this morning. Maybe it speaks to a bit more than the end of the world. **Rick Morley, who is the rector of St. Mark's Episcopal Church in New Jersey comments on Luke's Gospel in the following way; "We normally think of Advent as a time to prepare for Christmas. And, it is. "Advent" means "the coming," and it is indeed about Christ coming in Bethlehem... But, that's not all it's about. Because one of the tenets of our faith is that Christ will come *again*. And so, each Advent we begin with remembering Jesus' second coming, before we turn our attention back to Jesus' first coming. We see this theme in the Gospel lesson (Luke 21:25-36), which comes from the "little apocolypse" in Luke's Gospel. Jesus says here that he will return, and that there will be signs of that ringing throughout creation. He tells us that we are to be "alert," and ready to stand before him when he comes."**

And so as much as this reading from Luke may seem like it is talking about the end, but maybe it is talking about the beginning, the beginning of something new. Now that does not mean that we need to ignore this text completely because in many ways this is an amazing text as it describes these fantastical, extraordinary experiences and challenges us to believe in those things that are beyond our understanding of the physical world. All of the movies that I described showed an apocalyptic future that was relatable and too many of us possible. Jesus is speaking of the future world in terms that are beyond our understanding, "It will seem like all hell has broken loose—sun, moon, stars, earth, sea, ²⁶in an uproar and everyone all over the world in a panic," and what exactly does that mean. **David Lose who is the president of Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia speaks of this reading in the following way, 'In order to preach this text alright, I believe that we should first and foremost admit that it will sound to most of our hearings-and, quite frankly, also to us (if we really listen to it)-as sheer fantasy. Notice, however, that I didn't say it's not true, but rather it's fantasy-as in fantastical, beyond our experience, not of this world. And I would argue, precisely because it is not of this world, because it is beyond our physical and material existence and experience, it has the power to redeem us.'** And I think this is where we need to be today. We need to know that we are in the midst of something which we might not be able to explain. We are speaking of a coming again, and what that truly means is a new beginning. Just as the birth of a baby all those years ago was the promise of a new beginning. A new way to come into relationship with God. This promise that we are told, in our reading this morning from Jeremiah, was made to the ancient people, "Watch for this: The time is coming—God's Decree—'when I will keep the promise I made to the families of Israel and Judah.'" God has been sending God-self to us throughout history and there is always a new beginning. The reading from Luke is not about the end of things, but rather about a new beginning a time when Jesus will return and in the return there will be a world of justice, love and compassion, not a world of fear, anger, and hatred. We are called to be ready for that new beginning. And so we come to the birth of a baby, a reminder that God came in the form of a baby those many years ago, a reminder of the promise that God will come again.

And so what, do we sit and wait for God to come again? Do we just go about our lives as if nothing is different until we see these changes that are foretold, or are we called to something more in our lives? And this is the gamble of the Christian life. We are to live our lives in God today. We have been challenged to see a world that is beyond the confines of our existence as we know it. We are to live our lives as if God was here now, because in actuality God is in the here and now with us. Paul's letter to the Corinthians tells us that there will be one day when we will see clearly and when we will be fully known, but until that day we must live our lives in this world, which is not always friendly to God, and so we live holding onto the promise that God in Jesus will come again and we will be fully known in love incarnate because it is truly that love, this love that will redeem us, as it brings us to compassion, justice, understanding, and peace. A promise that is so big that it might just change the world. For if we truly live a life in God we can begin to see the start of God's creation on earth, we can start to see a world of justice, love, compassion, and hope as we wait at the ready for the coming of God in Jesus. This tiny baby, this helpless infant, whose birth we await is a reminder of the mighty promise that we are not alone. That we have never been alone that God is with us and will one day come again. What could be a better way to begin the countdown, but to remember that promise of God, that God incarnate in Jesus is coming back and that we are to work towards that coming in all that we do every day. Amen