

“God’s Promise of Nearness”
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury
Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36

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First Advent

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There is a wonderful warmness about the term “Advent” and the anticipation of Jesus’ “coming.” Sometimes themes are given to each Advent candle – joy, hope, faith, peace, love – as we weekly await Jesus’ birth. While waiting is often difficult, during Advent we view it with a sense of anticipation, such as waiting for the visit of a loved one, a close friend, a guest for whose arrival we have been preparing. To prepare, some of us may have already unboxed our nativity sets, put fresh straw in the manger, but left it empty as we wait.

Yet, our scriptures on the first Sunday of Advent do not direct our eyes to the stillness of the little town of Bethlehem. Instead, we are given the often anxiety producing passages of waiting and preparing for the second coming of Christ. Our Luke text sounds more dark than promising, more frightening than hopeful. As one writer describes it, Jesus’ words have “nature in turmoil and humanity on alert.” [Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 1, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), p. 21.]

I may be wrong, but I am guessing Jesus’ second coming and the signs of the end times were not discussed around your Thanksgiving tables. For the most part, I believe we have allowed others to define second coming, and when we hear such language as rapture and apocalypse, and imagery of a final battle between the forces of good and evil, we often withdraw. It is like a foreign language we prefer not to learn. Give me the manger, not the turmoil.

What I invite you to do is set aside the common perceptions of second coming associated with being left behind or raptured, and those fear-filled judgment day scenarios when one learns if one is in or out. Our Scripture texts are graphic, but I hear them inviting us out of fear with the promise of God’s nearness.

In our call to worship, Jeremiah offered hope for a people living under foreign rule, setting before them the promise of a return home, to their own land. From the ground of despair a righteous branch will spring up.

Our Luke reading is starker, with Jesus pointing to signs in the heavens and on the earth – think tornado, tsunami, hurricane, earthquake. The image of a robed man standing on the street corner holding a sign that reads, “The End is Near” could be read alongside it. Yet, we will also hear Jesus speak of sprouting leaves as hopeful signs of new life.

Let us listen with hope to our Gospel lesson, in 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.”

²⁹ Then Jesus 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 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.”

If you win the megamillions lottery, take it as a cash payout, because we have just five years left. I had not heard any recent predictions of when the earth would come to an end, so I had to check Wikipedia, and it seems way back in 1971, astrologist Jeane Dixon predicted 2020 as the year of Armageddon – just five years from now. Perhaps folks in Boston knew that when they decided to drop the bid for the 2024 Olympics! Yet, in fact, Jeane Dixon saw 2020 as the start of turmoil and indicated Jesus had a span of seventeen years to actually return; still, just in case, take the cash. Then again, Jeane Dixon also predicted all this would all happen in 1962, and we are still here.

I remember a few years ago, there was a prediction for the end of time coming in coordination with the Mayan calendar and a collision between Earth and the planet Nabiru. When NASA denied the existence of such a planet, believers claimed a government conspiracy hiding the truth of the planet’s existence. I recall the date of the collision was to be mid-December, which made me wonder if I should even think about a Christmas Eve sermon until after the date passed – I mean, just in case it was true.

Now a part of me can laugh off apocalyptic predictions and doomsday scenarios, but I think if I ignore them as I laugh, I can, by default, give them power. While we can dismiss them as a misreading of Scripture, or suggest the statute of limitations has come for the end time since it has been two millennia since Jesus predicted it, I think it wise for us to pay attention, not so much for the signs of the end, but for those who are holding those signs.

These days, we know that stark apocalyptic predictions are not just signaled by fringe groups that proclaim Jewish or Christian ties. Islam has its own apocalyptic writings around the return of the prophet Mohammed, though not all writings around this are considered part of the Koran by mainline Muslims; but groups like ISIS do, and it has appropriated the predictions into the heart of its terror.

I am not an expert on Christian apocalyptic beliefs, much less those connected with other faiths. I do find similarities in apocalyptic, end of time movements of fundamentalist groups. Most are focused on purity and see outsiders, foreigners, those who are different, as threatening their desire to establish a pure race or culture or nation. Violence is justified to protect this purity, preserve the greater good, and prepare for the awaited holy one.

Today we most prominently see this violence done by black hooded fighters recruited under a banner of a false Islam, intent on establishing a pure culture in preparation for the return of their prophet. Yet, lingering today, and publicly active just a few decades ago were white hooded figures in our own country, who gathered under the banner of a false Christianity, intent on establishing a purity of race, using burning crosses as their symbol, and while they did not publicly behead, they hung men and women from trees as large crowds watched and cheered the lynchings.

Whether ISIS, or the KKK, or other separatist groups, there is a common thread of violence being used to preserve purity. While there are more common threads in such movements, I offer three more:

1. Most gather under the banner of God, or Allah, or another named deity, and often use selected sacred writings that may or may not be part of their actual holy book. Those who disagree with them are called infidels or apostates. Violence is justified as serving God's purpose.
2. Most such groups provide a sense of community for their recruits, which may be something they have not experienced elsewhere. Sometimes this extends to care for conquered towns. As such, one more willingly submits one's freedom, and at times one's life, for the good feeling of belonging, of having a sense of family.
3. Most such groups subjugate women into a submissive role, even if they arm them with weapons or suicide vests. We know even our Christian Scriptures can be read to justify such, often upholding that role as being necessary to serve something larger than oneself.

I know this is not the way we envision beginning the Advent season of anticipation and promised joy. Yet, while we may not talk much about second coming, Jesus' words of the end of time are in our Scriptures. I believe we are to take charge of his message and not relinquish interpretation to those who misuse Jesus' words and life to create a fundamentalism that engenders a purity of faith or race or culture, instills fear, and justifies violence.

Fear. It is a powerful emotion, most profound in life and death situations of war, disease, or natural disaster, but also entering our lives at times of financial uncertainty and emotional confusion. The power of terror is rooted in the fear of something terrible happening in an unknown way, at an unpredictable time, in unrevealed place. The positions and sounds of fear include ducking and covering, crouching and hiding, shrieking and crying. Jesus says, 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."*

Elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus is firm we cannot know the time and place of his return. So, we live in the tension of near but not yet. Even in today's lesson, Jesus does not say the Kingdom of God has arrived. He says it is coming near. He knows that creates uncertainty, and tells his followers: ²⁸*"Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."*

Stand up and raise your heads – that is not a normal stance when one is uncertain or afraid. It contrasts with all the fear-filled images of Jesus coming again, that cause people to duck and cover, and run and hide.

When the end time is seen as an apocalyptic battle between the powers of good and evil, then Jesus' phrase "drawing near" is seen as armies preparing for combat. Yet, the Greek word, "en-gid-zo" suggests both an arrival, and a binding together. So, Jesus' image of redemption drawing near suggests one returning, and we again might think of the much anticipated arrival of a loved one or friend. We can imagine how we feel as their plane taxis to the gate, their train approaches the station, their car turns into the driveway. The "drawing near" is to be celebrated, not feared.

Jesus tells a parable of trees, and waiting for their sprouting leaves. While there are still a few oak trees clinging to their brown leaves, we are in a time of waiting until next spring, when trees and plants will again put forth new life, new leaves. I hear Jesus inviting us to be more anticipatory than anxious about signs of turmoil in the present. Advent can be our time to be ready for the sprouting leaves of hope, the new arrivals that may be drawing near in our own lives, even if we don't know how long our wait will be.

As we travel into the Advent season, anticipating God drawing near to us in the birth of Jesus, we are invited to sense a binding together, not a battle against. We can consider ways in which we need to tie up, to reconcile things in our lives, including relationships with family, or even in the church. Advent invites us to view reconciliations as welcome gifts to present at the manger.

Over this past month, I have shared thoughts of stewardship as gratitude and grace, as providing a place and people for us to give thanks to God in worship, nurture children and youth in faith, and go into the world in mission to share Christ's love and peace. This morning, I would suggest our stewardship is also found in the binding together nature of God's "coming near."

As we prepare for Christ's coming, the first coming, the second coming, and by the Holy Spirit, the daily ways in which he enters our lives, I would offer that our attentiveness to one other as well as the stranger marks our preparation. Our shunning of any purity of faith, culture, race, lifestyle or nation that isolates or excludes, enables us to be beacons of hope and readiness. The Church of Jesus Christ is marked by open doors, where all are welcomed to enter and find a sense of place, of family, of home, as together we await God's promise of nearness.