

Nathan Willard
Sermon Given for Second Congregational Church of Beverly
Jeremiah 33:14-16
Luke 21:25-36

Delivered at Second Congregationa Church UCC of Beverly, 11/29/09

A New Light for a New Year

Happy Advent!

Now, those of you who may be operating on the same calendar as Macy's and CVS may be surprised to find that the first Sunday in Advent is the last weekend in November and not the first weekend in November. But here we are. We come together in this, the first Sunday of our Church Year, to begin the countdown to the anniversary of Christ's birth. And so we find ourselves in a period of preparation for an event that happened some 2013 years ago (roughly). In fact, as I look around our church calendar, we spend quite a lot of time in periods of preparation. In addition to these four weeks of preparation, of waiting, we have the forty days of Lent, together making up close to one fifth of the church year. That is an awful lot of anticipation. And, as a lifelong fan of the Chicago Cubs, I know a thing or two about anticipation.

We see in our scripture readings for today two different models for waiting and preparation. First, we have Jeremiah. Jeremiah, who spends nearly all his time exhorting the inhabitants of Jerusalem to fulfill their covenant with God and predicting doom for them if they do not, brings us in today's passage a rare image of hope. "The time is coming"--God's Decree--'when I will keep the promise I made to the families of Israel and Judah. When that time comes, I

will make a fresh and true shoot sprout from the David-Tree. He will run this country honestly and fairly. That's when Judah will be secure and Jerusalem will live in safety." Jeremiah's message, in other words, is "live as you know you ought to live, and it will again be like it was in the glory days!" But of course, that's not what happened. While Jerusalem still stands, it never saw the protection and safety Jeremiah promised. Jeremiah anticipated the second coming of David, who, with God's help, would protect the city and the people from outside dangers. But instead, Israel got Jesus. And they didn't know quite what to do with him. Rather than restoring Jerusalem to its former glory, Jesus expanded God's promise to include all nations. It's as if Jesus's life was God's way of saying, "the past is the past. It is always good to remember the past, but remember that the past is not the future."

So that's why I like to look at Advent as more than the preparation for Christmas. I love telling the Christmas stories and listening to the carols that have come down through the ages; My iTunes Christmas playlist is currently 21 hours long and runs the gamut from A Charlie Brown Christmas to the Canadian Brass to the Lessons and Carols from King's College Cambridge. But even as we retell the story of Christmas and decorate our houses and bake our Christmas cookies, we should also remember that Advent is the first season of the church calendar. It is a time for celebrating the past, but that celebration is equally a time for living the future. Rather than anticipating what may come, we should dedicate ourselves to celebrating the life in front of us. The message of Jesus, so different from Jeremiah, is that we no longer need to live worrying and preparing for the coming of a Savior; our time is now.

LUKE

Those of you who were paying close attention to AJ's reading of Luke's gospel today may find some conflict between my suggestion to abandon anticipation and Luke's rendering of Jesus's apocalyptic ambitions. Jesus describes for us, after all, the future coming of Man, in a particular vision borrowed from the book of Daniel. He will come again in a cloud of Glory, to judge us all. How is this different from Jeremiah's vision of a future protector?

The core of today's Gospel passage is not the description of the Son of Man. It's the timing. "I tell you the truth," Jesus says, "this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away." Unlike Jeremiah's prediction, which was not imminent (millions of people wait still for the fulfillment of his prophecy), Jesus tells us that the judgment happens now, in our generation. And I say "our generation" because I guarantee you that every person who heard his words from his lips have passed out of this earth. So we could either take Jesus literally and say that he was wrong, or we can give him a little credit and recognize how eternal his words are, "But be on your guard," he says, "so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day close down upon you suddenly like a trap." For Jeremiah, the Israelites would return to righteousness, fulfilling their covenant with the Lord, and the Lord would send them a new protector. But here, Jesus is not promising a new protector. He knows that the last messenger has come into the earth, for it is him. Instead, he offers the imminence of God's glory. The judgment will happen in our lifetimes, he says, "For it will overtake all who live on the face of the whole earth." The question, of course, is what those end times look like. I am not a big believer in the apocalyptic visions of Daniel, Mark and Revelation. Instead, I think Jesus is making a subtler point here.

Jesus already came into the world in Glory, and we see in all of his Gospels his correction of those who misinterpret the message of God. He has given each of us the tools to bring about God's kingdom on earth without the need for a new ruler or savior. To do so, we much take up the challenge Jesus lays down to treat each day as our first and last, cherishing the gift of life now, in this world living the future now. Will we take up that challenge knowing that we have the strength to withstand any hardship in the world? Or will we find ourselves burdened by the constant worries about money and work and advancement and promotion and illness, and be caught in the trap of living in the old ways? The success of Jesus's vision relies on each of us to live, on guard against our hearts being burdened by the weights of the world.

So let us use this Advent as a new beginning, dedicated to living the redemption that Jesus has brought to us.

Second Church

You may now ask, "how do I do that?" And that is a very good question. The joy of being part of the UCC tradition is that the answer is different for each person. As part of the priesthood of all believers, our answers come from our own consciences. But, in short, it starts as "one day at a time." We have tried to make these past two weeks, weeks of new beginnings. Alan, Angie and the Vision team offered us all an opportunity to rethink our church life last week, as we committed to enacting the new vision of the church. And that new vision, developed by the Vision Team and guided by the Holy Spirit which shows itself so strongly in the work of this church, is all about fulfilling Jesus's promise. So, in your commitment to enact the vision, you committed yourself to a new beginning. If you weren't here last week, talk to a member of the

vision team and decide how you will help Second Church live our new vision. We started today reminding ourselves that God is Great, all of the time. Now I do not know if you have all heard that particular invocation before, but I borrowed it from First Church Somerville, whose senior minister you may know. There is, after all, only one Reverend Molly, and she was yours before she was theirs. I brought her invocation here to remind us how brightly the light of Second Church shines already, and how much brighter we can make it in the future by telling the world every day that God is indeed Great. So another way to have a new beginning is to begin each day of Advent with a prayer, reminding yourself that God has gifts for you. If you can think of nothing else, you can start with the affirmation that God is Great, all of the time, and go from there.

You will see the same theme of God's light in the world in the doxology printed in the bulletin during the offering. This is an alternate wording that is appropriate during Advent, as we light the candles in Jesus's honor, thanking God for taking the burdens off our hearts and shoulders and bringing the light into the world as a new beginning. One day, one week, one year at a time.

JOHN

I would like to leave you my favorite Advent narrative in the four Gospels. As you make your own preparations for Christmas, and worry about all the stresses that come with even this joyous time, remember these words. Turn to page _____ in your Bibles if you would like to follow along.

It comes from the Gospel of John. First chapter, first verse.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

Now, do you remember what Jesus said? His words would never die, even if the heavens and the earth came to an end. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. "The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not." It is dark outside. And it is going to get darker. But in this season of Advent, we are reminded by the candles we light that there is one light that the darkness cannot comprehend. As we celebrate our new church year, let us each and together resolve anew to drive out the darkness with the light that Christ brought into the World. Now and Forever. Amen. Amen. Amen.