

Being Hopeful & Prepared Advent 1 Year C
Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-10;
1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36

In an old Calvin and Hobbes comic strip - this conversation takes place. In the first frame Calvin speaks to Hobbes and says: "Live for the moment is my motto. You never know how long you got".

In the second frame he explains, "You could step into the road tomorrow and WHAM, you get hit by a cement truck! Then you'd be sorry you put off your pleasures. That's what I say - live for the moment."

Then Calvin asks Hobbes: "What's your motto?"

Hobbes replies: "My motto is - Look down the road."

Today's scripture readings are about what is coming down the road towards us. They are about the promise God has made to us. And they are an invitation to dare to dream as well as warnings, so be prepared.

The traditional theme for this first Sunday of Advent is *hope*. Our Scriptures speak of this hope in terms of waiting for, anticipating some future action of God. This future action of God is described in the language of righteousness, justice, and steadfast love. We dream and dare to imagine these dimensions of God's goodness being revealed one day in all their fullness. Hope is always part of the Advent season as are the warnings to be prepared.

Our scripture from **Jeremiah 33** was an oracle to the southern kingdom of Judah of hope, promising God's restoration after a time of barrenness and defeat. The Almighty promises the Creator's justice and righteousness will be revealed by God's righteous Messiah - the "Branch" from David's root. Have we ever experienced hope when we needed it? Could we name Covid as another time of difficulty, fear, uncertainty, turmoil, that needs hope?

In **Psalm 25**, we experience God's "steadfast love," *hesed in Hebrew*, which convinces us and leads us, to learning and walking in God's way of peace, truth & righteousness. We learn to believe in Yahweh's forgiveness and grow in humbleness. How have we experienced God's steadfast love in the past year and in our lives?

Our text from **First Thessalonians 3** includes a prayer of benediction for the good God to increase the believers' love, our love, for one another and everyone. It is also a prayer asking to strengthen our hearts in holiness. And it offers thankfulness for the joy we receive in a holy God. How might this connection of love, holiness, and thankfulness, shape our growing in blamelessness in God's loving hope?

In **Luke 21**, Jesus calls on us, to watch & wait for the fullness of God's kingdom our "redemption" that is to come. This future revelation of God's goodness brings some foreboding, some warnings. God's hopeful goodness brings judgment on all that is not good, all that promotes unrighteousness & injustice. So what does this double-edged, good news-bad news, goodness of God look like for us and this world as the Almighty brings redemption for the lowly faithful, but judgment for the powerful abusers?

What do all these warnings and promises of hope to prepare for Jesus' coming, mean for us today? In this holy season at the start of the Christian year, which speaks of a time of expectant waiting, preparation, and hope of the coming of the Christ Child, what does it mean for us? I don't think it's an accident that those who planned the lectionary put these scriptures for us to consider today. They remind us of the **three-fold coming of Christ**.

The **first coming** of Jesus is clear. The Son of God came to earth in physical form. We have the mystery of the incarnation – God with us.

And we wait for **the second coming** of Christ in glory at the end time. This is more difficult to understand, but it's one of the core beliefs of Christianity that's often mentioned in the Bible.

And there is the *third coming* of Jesus. It's not just a past event of hope we celebrate. And it not just a future promised anticipation that we may fear. It's also the coming of Jesus into our midst, today. *The power of the Holy Spirit, of the Risen Lord, touches and changes lives, in all kinds of ways.* We experience our Savior in the gifts of grace we receive. We see lives changed. We notice glimpses of justice. We know signs of hope when they occur within our own souls. We celebrate Kingdom values and Kingdom living. Jesus gives us peace, life, joy, hope & guidance for living, right now. Advent allows us to dare to imagine the power and glory of our risen Lord, despite all that is wrong with this world and with ourselves.

That's why Jeremiah could promise, speaking for the Almighty God, to a tired, defeated and discouraged people, "The days are coming, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous branch to spring up for David, and he will execute righteousness in the Land."

Let's think about this. What does it mean to us now, this promise of God? What does it mean when Jesus says to us that there is a day coming when the Son of Man will come to us in a cloud with power and great glory? What do these promises mean now during a busy hectic life? What do the promises of hope and warnings about the future mean when we are caught up in trying to do all we can do right here and now in the present? What do they mean when we are struggling to live one day at a time - as we try to be all things to many people, as we represent Jesus? And of course, we have to ask what do these warnings and promises mean for us and this world, as we hear this Christmas news?

In **Luke 21**, we find there will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. Jesus predicts the end of the Temple and Jerusalem. Then Jesus talks about a worldwide terror. Nations will be in anguish and perplexity. People will faint in fright. Heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time, we will see the Son of Man coming with

power and great glory. Jesus advises, "*When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.*" Don't be in denial.

Jesus makes use of apocalyptic stage props like those of Joel 3: 3-4. This kind of language is often used to imply sudden and violent change and the emergence of a new order. The fabric of the universe will show signs of breaking up. The implication is chaos will replace order. People will be upset, fearful and puzzled. It seems so often that common sense is ignored. Is this what we are seeing today? I know we have seen chaotic times in history, but are we facing some new dynamics? Or with our new forms of communication does it feel the world is breaking down more than ever before?

The Bible tells us the end time is inevitable, but unpredictable, despite any signs. "Signs" are present in every age and are signs of the "age," *which means they are signs of sin.* But Jesus teaches his disciples to be just as concerned with the "meantime," the in-between time, as with the end-time, and even more so. We are to live lives always prepared for the end, both the end of the world and the end of our time in the world. In the meantime, there will be false messiahs, persecutions, catastrophes of all sorts – cosmic, agricultural, social, political, familial & personal. But believers are to keep focused on hope as we follow Jesus and embrace Kingdom living.

Those without God's eternal vision will react in a predictable way – with fear and in panic. It is the "way of the world" to do so. Pessimism and despair are themselves signs, signs of unbelief – like the run-on toilet paper. But whenever there is an appearance of God to humans, the message always begins with, "Fear not." Only believers can counter fear with courage during tumult & conquer it. But those of this world encounter fear with panic, paralysis & despair.

Then we are told everyone will see the Son of Man – Jesus. Jesus tells his followers not to deny the facts, the undeniable, but to interpret

then correctly. Will people deny what they see like they deny Covid? Then in **verse 28**, Jesus followers are told to stand erect and raise our heads. Jesus is commanding this act as a sign of distinction from the cowering and fearful.

And as often happens, Jesus gives us an illustration. **The fig tree** reminded Jesus of the final judgment and what leads up to it. In contrast to most of the trees of Palestine, the olive, oak, and evergreens, the fig tree loses its leaves in the winter. And in contrast to the almond which blossoms in early spring, the fig shows signs of life later than other trees. So when the branches get soft by the sap flowing through them and leaves begin to appear, it is a sure sign that the warm season is very near.

The lesson is that there is not a lot of time between the first signs of life and the full-blown blossom, like the other trees. So be careful, the end is soon. Keep a watchful eye for all signs of life, for all the signs of the presence of God. The image of the fig tree lends itself to Jesus' constant teaching of being watchful and prepared for the imminent End. Redemption is drawing near. The Kingdom of God is near – be watchful and ready. Scripture tells us, Jesus' words will never pass away.

Verse 32 is one of those difficult Bible verses. "I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened." Much has been written about what this means as people try to predict the end times. It could mean, the first readers of this text will see the devastation of Jerusalem and the Temple, in their lifetime. This occurred about 40 years after Jesus died in 70 A.D.

If we consider the Bible as a timeless book, then everyone who reads these words, at any time in history, receives the warning, and the meaning of the third coming of Jesus, applies. That is, everyone must decide about faith in Jesus, to follow him, or not to believe.

Or the warning could refer to the future coming of Christ. But I think these words fit all three

applications, because they seem like a blanket promise and warning. It's like the saying, "hope for the best and plan for the worst." But be the people of hope. That is what we have to offer to the world – the hope in Jesus Christ.

So, we must take the advice of **verse 34**. The term "Your hearts" simply means our attitudes toward these warnings. We could paraphrase, "Don't succumb to the intoxicating attractions of a sinful world while you are waiting for the end. Don't let the delay of Jesus' return lull you into complacency, compromise, comfort, or the conceit that you have plenty of time. Beware that your way of life is not burdened or dulled by the poisoning of material things."

This warning is followed up by **verse 35**. The end will come. There will be no exceptions or exemptions. No note from a doctor or a parent will be an acceptable excuse. These are harsh words of warning.

So, **verse 36** tells us the only sensible thing to do is be always prepared. Watch and pray so we may be able to escape all that is about to occur, so we can stand before the Son of Man. ***We are not to live in a state of emergency, but in a state of urgency.*** Keep a sense of urgency, and realize that our personal death is, in fact, soon and unpredictable. This attitude gives meaning, purpose, and hope to every moment.

Waiting is not sitting down and doing nothing. It is preparing for the inevitable. It is acting in such a way that the "visit," the "inspection" can come at anytime. It is keeping the house clean, the books in order, the table set, and even clean towels on the bathroom racks.

The end times are like much of life. A new job comes with dreams and fears. Newly weds face both anticipation and worries. A new baby offers joy and promise, but also hard work and wisdom. So does Advent. We should not be surprised that Christmas challenges us to dare to imagine God's goodness. But it also tells us to look down the road of life and be ready with hope as we learn and walk in God's ways.