

Sermon for November 28, 2021—“With the World Enough”

First Sunday of Advent, Year C—Texts: Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36

Mother Teresa once told a story about a time she came down with a high fever. As her temperature climbed, she became delirious. She had a vision of being at the gates of heaven, and telling St. Peter that she was ready to pass from this world to the next. But St. Peter refused her entry into the high vault of heaven. Mother Teresa asked why. Peter replied: “Because there are no slums in heaven.”

It’s the first Sunday of Advent, and we could easily trivialize this season, this beginning of a new church year (that would be Year C for those keeping track). We could focus so on the Advent wreath, and the other church symbols of the season, and miss the vocation, the deep longing, of Advent.

Then, too, we might easily spiritualize this season, seeing it only as a time for inner preparation for the joyous tide of Christmas. And by spiritualize, I mean simply that we’ll be a little nicer to people, have a better attitude, maybe be more generous, more thoughtful—etc., etc. Unfortunately, that seems to wear off the minute the tree comes down—if not a whole lot sooner. This is why I believe that waiting for the Christ Child is best spent working for the cause of Jeremiah’s “righteous branch.”

I’m guessing that some of you are hearing that, and asking: what cause? And what’s Jeremiah mean by “righteous Branch?” Well, the “righteous branch” is probably Jesus. His cause, briefly stated, is the establishment of the Kingdom of God here on earth. Which is to say justice, peace, and right relationship with God—that whole “Matthew 25” thing I’ve been talking about. St. Peter turned Mother Teresa away from heaven’s gate because there was still work for her to do.

You might recall that her work was in slums, mainly in Calcutta, India, working with the poorest of the poor, lepers, AIDS victims, those whom we might call the “least of these.” Her work was with them, **not** in the glory of heaven. At least not yet. So it is with us.

If Advent is anything, it’s a season of painful waiting **in** the world, but not detached **from** the world. It’s a season of darkness before the dawn that will break from on high. It’s a season in which we wait for something that has indeed begun, and that we’ve been told is coming, but which is not yet.

It’s about redemption that, according to Luke’s Gospel, is “**drawing near.**” It’s a time to be alert, a time of praying that we’ll have the “**...strength to escape,**” something that’s “**...coming upon the world,**” something that will cause us to “**faint from fear and foreboding.**” But Advent is also about the coming of the Child of Mary, the return of “righteous Branch,” and the end of history. There will be, Jesus tells us, “**...signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea, and the waves.**”

Our calling as disciples, strange as this may sound, is to make Advent more about earth than heaven. We must be like Peter at heaven’s gate. We must remind ourselves that there’s work to do as we wait for the Lord of History. The best way to wait is to work for God’s kingdom; for justice and righteousness; for peace. And wouldn’t you know it, that’s what the prophet Jeremiah and Mother Teresa both did.

What about us?

I mean, it's Advent, what are we going to do? That's not an easy question. I say that because in my experience people are largely of two minds about Advent. One, is that we like the symbols that are associated with it: the Advent wreath, the lighting of the candles each week, etc. We like the sanctuary decorated, the wrought iron candles holders attached to the pews, in anticipation of the Christmas Eve service. We like the rough-hewn manger awaiting the Christ-child.

We love the decorations in our homes: Christmas trees, wreaths, stockings hung by the chimney with care, the Nativity sets handed down through the generations, and so forth, as Christmas draws ever closer.

Yet, as much as we anticipate all of these there are other signs of the season. There are other parts of Advent, that are perhaps less comforting. For some, the first discordant tone is struck when the liturgical color shifts to purple, which is—for some—a reminder of Lent. And—like Lent—there are those Advent hymns with their somber melodies, and stern admonishments. “Let all mortal flesh keep silence, and with fear and trembling stand” feels far-removed from “Joy to the World.” “O Come, O Come Emmanuel,” while nice, seems worlds away from “Gloria In Excelsis Deo.”

And if the hymns aren't bad enough, along come the biblical texts for Advent. It's a shock to our holiday spirits, when each year the lectionary kicks off the season of Advent with a reading from Luke's gospel known as the “little apocalypse.” It's a passage in which Jesus speaks, as we just heard, of the end of the world.

Standing in the temple, not long before his crucifixion, Jesus talks about roaring seas, and nations in distress. He describes a scene in which a great earthquake shakes all of creation—a cataclysm so terrifying that people are fainting in fear. Not easy to listen to for those who're already humming “Jingle Bell Rock” or “Santa Claus is Coming to Town.” I mean, seriously, who want to hear all this?!?! We're trying to get ready for Christmas, darn it!!! Can't we do so without all this “doom and gloom” stuff?

We wish. The news won't let us. So, as Advent begins, as a new church year begins, we're asked to think about the end. Literally. We're asked to stop thinking about the baby that is being born, and the man who is coming again. The imagery of these apocalyptic texts, when you begin to think about them, and try to picture what's to happen, what you tend to get is stark, horrifying, and larger than life.

Luke speaks of sweeping destruction, natural disasters, and human catastrophe. What I want to know is this: Who could've **possibly** thought that evoking these frightening images would be a good way to begin the Christmas season?

Well, me—for one.

But seriously, all this flies in the face of what we believe Christmas to be about, what we're actually trying NOT to think about this time of year. If we didn't know better, we'd think that it's all some sort of plot, a plot by a bunch of bitter, spiteful, “Grinch-like” theologians, who seem bent on spoiling Christmas. I mean, take “A Christmas Carol” for example. I don't mean the movie adaptations, especially not the musical version, the one with Albert Finney—nice though that is. Seriously—has anyone actually **read** it?

Those that have, know very well, that Charles Dickens' classic is full of social criticism, scathing commentary on the treatment of the poor, especially children. It doesn't shy from harsh words for the mid-Victorian era's revival of the holiday, and the images Dickens uses ...are frightening.

At one point, he describes the children, hidden in the folds of the robe of the Ghost of Christmas Present as "...yellow, meager, ragged, scowling wolfish. Where angels might have sat enthroned, devils lurked, and glared out menacing...no perversion of humanity, in any grade, has monsters half so horrible and dread."

The boys name? "Ignorance." The girls? "Want." Scrooge asks: Have they no refuge or resource?" Using Scrooge's own words, the Ghost replies, "Are there no prisons? "Are there no workhouses?" "Many can't go there," is the reply, "and most would rather die." "If they would rather die, they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population."

Unfortunately, Ebenezer Scrooge, who Dickens describes as that "wrenching...covetous old sinner," has become a caricature—a joke played for laughs. One wonders: could this be a sign of our tendency to edit anything and everything that might detract us from a "holly, jolly" Christmas?

Maybe. But I'm wondering, if Advent might be a time when we're jolted out of our comfort zones and safe isolation into the realities of a very scary world. I mean—isn't that what Jesus did? The short answer's yes. But—and this is important—the Gospel readings, today and over the next two weeks, when we are re-introduced to John the Baptist, aren't simply asking us to recognize a difficult reality.

No, what Luke's telling us is that in the midst of this terrible stuff we mustn't be fearful, we're to be watchful and vigilant. Why? Well, because in these times there's more to see. In the midst of chaos—God dwells. God is in control! There's comfort here in knowing that we're not alone. What this means, though, is that we await a Messiah that stands over and against a dark and violent world, everything that prompts us to call out, with the psalmist: "How long, O Lord?

In this, these texts, and others like them, seem incredibly pertinent for our times. Apocalyptic stories look and sound a lot like the images that we see in the news. As such—they're shocking. They go on to include a vision, a vision of the "Son of Man" coming "...with great power and glory." They are meant to give us hope. Hope that isn't based on **ignoring** the world's problems, but instead working together to meet them head on. It's a hope grounded in a God who stands in the midst of these times offering us redemption in the person of Jesus Christ.

In this, Luke's Gospel asserts, that while the powers of evil are real and terrible, they're not **permanent**. What endures to the end and beyond is God's vision for humanity. A vision articulated by the prophets of old who spoke judgment, yes—but who also spoke words of justice, peace, and restoration.

So—for those of us who're convinced that we've no business talking about the end of the world this time of year, Advent provides, as B. C. Forbes once said,

"...a tonic for our souls. It moves us to think of others rather than of ourselves. It directs our thoughts to giving."

It encourages us to be faithful in the midst of troubled times, and places where the end of the world doesn't seem quite so far off, places where God is already at work. It encourages us to look for ways to help. Do we?

William Wordsworth, in his poem, *The World Is Too Much With Us*—wrote...

*The world is too much with us—late and soon...
Getting and spending—we lay waste our powers...
Little we see in nature that is ours...
We have given our hearts away—a sordid boon!*

*This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon...
The winds that will be howling at all hours...
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers...
For this—for everything—we are out of tune...
It moves us not—Great God!*

Great God indeed. Brothers and sisters—here's the thing...

In the Jesus of Crib and Cross, God comes to be with us, and for us, that we may taste and see how good God truly is. And so this Advent, we must be with the world **enough**. We must travel lightly with only our prayers, softened hearts, and open, willing hands.

We must be alert at all times, especially for the least of these, those for whom Christmas is just another day. We must ask daily for the strength to stand, now and in the last great day, before the Son of Man and of God, the Child of Mary and Lord of History.

With all our hearts we say, "Come Lord Jesus!"

Amen and amen.