

Light the Candles! Advent One a sermon by The Rev. Keenan Colton Kelsey
Noe Valley Ministry, a progressive Presbyterian Church December 3, 2006

Text: Luke 21: 25-36

There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. 26Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. 27At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. 28When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." 29He told them this parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees. 30When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. 31Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near. 32"I tell you the truth, this generation^[a] will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. 33Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. 34"Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap. 35For it will come upon all those who live on the face of the whole earth. 36Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.

Jeremiah 33:14-16

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, 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 shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: 'Our God is our righteousness.'

THIS IS THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT – and I confess, one of the best parts of my week was dusting off the mohair crèche scene that Heather and the children just used; and unwrapping our marvelous French paper-mache figures, and deciding that we would first meet. Yonder is a shepherd, contentedly playing his pipe up in the hills. As some of you will remember, the rest of the cast will gather throughout this month.

This is the fun Advent preparation; because frankly, I want to think of Jesus' birth in gentle backlit terms. I want to go with pictures of sheep and shepherds against an angelic musical background. I want the sweetness of the nativity. The picture includes peace in the land.

But readings like we heard today bring me up short. They remind me that there was peace in the land all right. But at the time of Jeremiah it was the peace of the conquering Babylonians, a peace which had laid siege to Jerusalem, destroying the temple, reducing the countryside to a wasteland, sending people into exile. God seemed to be silent in that peace, preoccupied with judging the people for past wrongs.

Yes, there was peace in the land just before the birth of Jesus. But it was the peace of Rome, brought in with the tramp of Legions' boots and imposed by a firm Roman grip, including threats and restrictions and taxes. It was a peace of fear and apocalypse-- Luke's language reflected the only way the Middle Eastern peasant class could anticipate fear: freedom via an imminent cosmic cataclysm in which God destroys the ruling powers of evil and raises the righteous to life in a messianic realm.

This kind of talk would ordinarily make me want to crawl under the bed and stay there. But this Advent I am holding on for dear life to the underlying reassurance in both readings that God intends to make the world right again.

Suddenly it seems appropriate that this most hopeful season of the Christian calendar begins in darkness. When we lit the first candle on the Advent wreath, it was not a moment too soon. This Advent I feel an urgent need for the light that comes from God, for signs of change in the universe; and I do not think I am the only one.

There is the presence doom and despair in our world today. It is in our churches and communities. There are the usual horrors of natural disasters played out in flooding throughout Africa. There is the very real, on-going, life-destroying creep of global warming: the creation of an increasingly dense canopy in our atmosphere as we generate more and more carbon dioxide. World AIDS day, this past Friday, reminded us of on-going ravages of AIDS; and Gary Eberling's death reminded us of the unfair and fatal ravages of cancer. There is war; this war in Iraq has lasted so long, with so much unnecessary and arbitrary death. The voices of division in our land and in our church are loud, so loud. And the clouds of anxiety about the future hover so low that, just like an immersion in Golden Gate fog, you can barely see your hand in front of your face.

Like people exiled from all that was familiar, home, temple, friends, food; we too know pain. And into the pain of the moment, Jeremiah offers words of comfort and promise. With outrageous audacity, Jeremiah promised security in the midst of chaos, righteous leadership in the midst of the consequences of corrupt government and super-power politics! What a vision God gave him - a vision that still speaks across the ages to us today. Apparently with God a promise made is a promise kept. Given the empty wasteland all around, I don't know how Jeremiah could see anything hopeful about the future. Yet he was sustained by his conviction that the outcome of human history was in the hands of God, who could be trusted to make the city a place of safety and the land a center of salvation.

Jesus had the same purpose in mind when he spoke of the end of the world and then reassured his followers with the parable of the fig tree: Look at the fig tree and all the trees. As soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already here. So also, when you see these things taking place you know that the realm of God is near. What a strange blend of warning and comfort! Watch but prepare. Endure, but hope. Struggle, but trust the promise. Then and now, we need such hope!

Author Barbara Kingsolver tells the story of Hallie a young woman who is living in Nicaragua during a US-led attack. Hallie writes this to her sister: "You're thinking of revolution as a great all -or-nothing. I think of it as one more morning in a muggy cotton field, checking the undersides of leaves to see what's been there, figuring out what to do that won't clear a path for worse problems next week. Right now that's what I do. You ask why I'm not afraid of loving and losing, and that's my answer. Wars and elections are both too big and too small to matter in the long run. The daily work - that goes on, it adds up. It goes into the ground, into crops, into children's bellies and their bright eyes. Good things don't get lost.

"Codi, here's what I've decided: the very least you can do in your life is to figure out what you hope for. And the most you can do is live inside that hope. Not admire it from a distance but live right in it, under its roof. What I want is so simple I almost can't

say it: elementary kindness. Enough to eat, enough to go around. The possibility that kids might one day grow up to be neither the destroyers nor the destroyed. That's about it. Right now I'm living in that hope, running down its hallway and touching the walls on both sides. I can't tell you how good it feels. I wish you knew." (as quoted in *Worship in the Spirit of Jesus*)

I remember hearing a BBC newscaster who was asked about the impact of reporting so much bad news, so much gloom and doom, death and corruption. She replied that when the news began to report the good news we should worry...for that would mean that good news had become the exception. She claimed that the news reports first the unusual...that so long as violence was the daily report, then violence remained the abnormal. I think both Jesus and Jeremiah would call this the Advent hope.

When I read Jeremiah I find hope. And when I read Jesus, I realize that such hope is always rooted in action. Waiting for the Christ coming is not an idle, passive activity. It is waiting that is passionate and active. It is about calling for reform in the world, personal and social.

It makes me think of my laser eye surgery some five years ago. I thought I was going to walk in, be zapped, and go to work. WRONG! Instead of driving home after the surgery, my sister had to be summoned, I was to lie very quietly in subdued light, for 24 hours, I had several kinds of eye drops, I was not to pick up heavy items or move furniture – harsh instructions, and unexpected correctives --along with the caveat that my eyesight wouldn't even be clear again for months. Instructions and warnings. Yet, I could sense the deep care and compassion of my doctor. Apparently the point of the warnings and the compassionate concern coming together as they did, was to help me see better. Perhaps, telling us of his second coming is Jesus' way of performing spiritual laser surgery on his followers. He wants us to be able to see things for what they are and not be fooled by the powers of this world. He wants us to be able to take the long view so that we can see the arrival of a world marked by God's justice and righteousness.

I admit -- there is a confusing complexity in waiting for what has already come. No one has ever expressed the hope of the second coming more clearly for me than Martin Luther King Jr. "I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word. Until then, we are bound by faith not to be weighed down by the worries of this life. There is too much work to do, too much watchful readiness to maintain."

Advent, the already and the not yet, is all bound up in another absolutely wonderful but perplexing word: *prolepsis*. It means acting as if what you expect to happen has already happened. It means the assumption of a future act or development as if presently existing or accomplished. **It is** the application of an adjective to a noun in anticipation of the result of the action of the verb. If we can imagine the future, we can live into it. We can bring about that for which we can wait. Are you willing?

The darkness is already breaking up! Let there be light! Bring on the Advent candles and let's live in love and act in hope until Jesus comes, and comes again.

May it be so. Amen.