

THE JOURNEY'S PROMISE

Jeremiah 33:1, 10-16, OT p. 737

Psalms 25:4-10, OT p. 499

Luke 21:25-36, NT p. 85

November 29, 2009

1st Sunday of Advent

Marilyn Allen

Why do we do this? Why do we spend so much time on Christmas? We plan. We make our lists and check them twice – and hope not to lose those lists. We decorate. I had my younger son on a tall ladder on Thanksgiving, putting up large wreaths at the peaks of the house and garage. Some of the houses around here have had lights on since last weekend. We shop – for food, for presents, for more decorations, and at the church bazaar. At this season, sometimes we even compare our preparations to what we see on television, or to what our neighbors are doing, or to what we used to do in the “good old days.” We can plan and decorate and shop and compare ourselves into exhaustion and/or depression. Is that the way to begin our journey into Advent?

Why do we do this? In the church, four Sundays before Christmas, we change our colors from green or white to purple. Purple is the color of preparation, and certainly we are preparing for Christmas. We bring out the Advent wreath and light the candles, one more each Sunday. We sing hymns of waiting, although I like to put in one or two familiar carols that reflect on the theme of the day. The mood of Sunday morning here is a contrast to what we find at Fred Meyer and WalMart. No “Jingle Bell Rock” or “Santa Claus is Coming to Town.” It’s a contrast to what we find ourselves doing too often during the week. This is another way to begin our Advent journey.

Why do we do this? We read this morning about the destruction of Jerusalem – two different destroying armies are at the gates. In the time of Jeremiah, in 586 B.C., the Babylonian army had put up siege ramps against the city walls. Jerusalem would soon be

destroyed, and its people would be taken into exile. In the time of Jesus and the disciples, Judah was a very poor part of the Roman Empire. There were always pockets of rebellion and desperate people willing to fight the Roman army. That could not continue indefinitely. When Jesus talked about the coming destruction of the city, he also included signs of the beginning of the kingdom of God, and the return of the Son of Man (himself) in power and glory. These stories are part of our Advent preparation? Where is peace, where is joy, where is love in stories like these?

Joy and love may be missing. Peace is definitely in short supply. But there is another Advent word, and that word is hope. The prophet Jeremiah was in custody in the palace. His cousin had somehow gotten into the city and offered to sell Jeremiah a family field, and at the word of the Lord, Jeremiah bought it. You can read that story in chapter 32 of Jeremiah. That purchase was a sign that eventually the people of Israel would return to their own land. The word of the Lord to Jeremiah that we heard a few minutes ago is a word of hope, a word of promise. Laughter, voices of bride and groom, singing of people bringing thank offerings to the house of the Lord – these will again be heard in the land. People will pasture sheep on the hills and even in the desert, in safety. The righteous Branch, the Messiah will come to bring justice and equality so that the people will be able to live as God intends.

In a time of great distress, as the people of Jerusalem face destruction and exile, the prophet speaks a word of hope, a word of promise from the Lord, who is good, whose steadfast love endures forever. More than five centuries later, Jesus speaks a word of hope to his disciples who also face incredible difficulties. “Stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

I usually skip the Second Coming readings on this first Sunday of Advent, for several

reasons. They don't sound much like Christmas stories. People have a wide variety of ideas about what these mean. I have trouble saying that I don't know how to interpret these words of Jesus, because I don't take them literally. I grew up with a literal interpretation of the Second Coming, and as a child, I was afraid. I've avoided reading the Left Behind books and seeing the movies, because they show Jesus as vengeful and destructive, in an apocalyptic end of the world.

That's probably not what these words of Jesus mean. The coming of the Messiah is not about destruction but about restoration, so that all people and all of creation can live according to God's good intentions. Creation can be in balance as well as productive. Human life will be restored, in personal relationships of peace, and in economic, social and political relationships that are fair, with everyone having enough and no one having too much. All of this is part of the kingdom of God that has come near in Jesus. His ministry was a sign of the kingdom, that good rule of God that is so different than human rule. This word of Jesus is a word of hope and promise.

Why do we do this? Why have we begun this Advent journey with these words from Jeremiah and Jesus? Because in Advent we hear once more the promise of God. "I will restore joy, honest worship, thanksgiving, safety, community, justice and righteousness, so that my people may live in safety and know my salvation." The promise of God comes in a time and place where the future is at a dead end and hope seems impossible, yet that is exactly where God is at work.

Our time is not so different. We might not see siege ramps around Washington D.C., or armies marching in the streets. We still have freedom to worship. Yet there are many forces that oppose God's good rule, in our country and around the world. Wars and tribal

conflicts destroy farms and cities. Millions are refugees from ancestral homes. Disasters both natural and economic turn life upside down in an instant. Personal lives may seem to be at a dead end. In just such a time, the word of the Lord comes as promise. “I will restore. I will make things right. I will send my Messiah. My people will again live in peace and safety.” That is a promise to hold on to.

Our Advent journey begins in hope. Along the way, we have an assigned task. Jesus told his disciples to “stay alert.” Pay attention to what God is already doing. Notice the little things, just as you would notice signs of spring in a tree’s new leaves. Don’t worry about the future. Don’t be distracted by entertainment (in the version of Luke I read, it’s called dissipation and drunkenness).

How will you pay attention to the presence of God on your Advent journey? Here are a few suggestions. Get an Advent devotional booklet on the way out of church, and read from it daily. You might want to light Advent candles at home. Read the first two or three chapters of Luke, slowly, in different translations, focusing on a word or phrase as you go. Notice the promises of God in those early chapters, especially in the songs of Mary and Zachariah – promises of God for salvation, equality and justice. Pray, listening for God in silence as well as using your own words or written prayers. I like to read other people’s prayers because they often pray for things I wouldn’t think of. These are all ways to enter into an attitude of alertness.

Once we are alert, we will see what God is already doing, signs of God’s rule. We’ll notice people who show courage against injustice and discrimination. We’ll hear stories and even experience in our own lives miracles of forgiveness and reconciliation – have you seen the new Salvation Army commercials? We’ll see the kindness of people, such as those who

offer long-term care for people who can no longer care for themselves. When we go to Avamere next Sunday afternoon for Christmas caroling, notice the staff and thank them. All expressions of faith and hope in this season are signs of God's promised kingdom, so when we hear Christmas music, read cards and letters from distant friends, hear stories of sharing, we know that the rule of God is near.

What might we do to participate in God's kingdom? We can share what we have with those in need. On or before December 13 you may bring gifts for Toy and Joy, which we'll collect here. There is more information about that in the newsletter. You may also want to bring a pound or two of butter for a "butter shower" for Community Meals. We'll collect that on December 13 as well. You might take some time for those who live alone, and there are a lot of us just in this congregation as well as in our community. Cards, phone calls, going out to lunch, being part of the deacons' phone buddy program are all ways to bring God's hope to one another. We do these things and many more, not just in December, but year-round.

Why do we do this? Why do we observe Advent and celebrate the birth of a baby in Bethlehem two thousand years ago? We are on this journey of hope because we trust in the One who makes promises, the One who has come and comes to us still, the One whose steadfast love endures forever, the One whose name is Love. Let us go forward in hope, trusting in the promises of God.

Let us pray. God of steadfast love, thank you for your promises, not just to our ancestors in faith, but to us. Give us faith and hope for this journey, that we may be always alert to signs of your presence among us. Give us courage and strength to work for your new day. In the name of Christ our Savior, Amen.