

DAYS TO COME

**A sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
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Today the liturgical year for Christians begins anew. It all starts with Advent, four Sundays before Christmas.ⁱ “Be on your guard,” warns Jesus in the gospel of Luke, “so that your hearts are not weighed down with...the worries of this life, and that day [that day of the coming of the Son of Man with power and great glory] does not catch you unexpectedly.”ⁱⁱ Advent is on the one hand a time of waiting for Christmas, for the birth of the Christ child, but it’s also a time of waiting for the days to come in our future when, as Jeremiah puts it, there shall be “justice and righteousness in the land.”ⁱⁱⁱ As we sang in the opening hymn, “Now is the time approaching, by prophets long foretold, when all shall dwell together, secure and manifold. Let war be learned no longer, let strife and triumph cease, all earth a blessed garden, and God the god of peace.”^{iv}

How far we seem to be from those days to come, however. Carnage continues unabated in Iraq. Lebanon is a tinderbox. Jeremiah may speak of a promise made to the house of Israel and of Jerusalem living in safety, but that’s far from the current reality. And then we have the genocide in Darfur, the scourge of AIDS in Africa and in many other parts of the world that we just noted Friday on World AIDS day, threats on the Korean peninsula, and the list of agony and torment seems endless. Yet, Jeremiah was not speaking at a particularly auspicious time either. He was confined in prison in Jerusalem by the Jewish King, Zedekiah, while the Babylonian army was besieging the city in 588 and 587 B.C.E.^v By the end of the siege, the great Jewish Temple in Jerusalem had been looted and destroyed, the city itself lay in ruins, many Jewish leaders had been executed, and a significant portion of the population had been taken into exile

in Babylonia, which we now call Iraq.^{vi} King Zedekiah himself was forced to watch his sons being executed; then the Babylonians gouged out his eyes and dragged him off to Babylon. In the midst of all this Jeremiah is saying in the name of God that in the days to come “I am going to bring...recovery and healing; I will ... reveal to them abundance of prosperity and security. I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel...There shall once more be heard the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness.”^{vii}

Advent has always had two sides. It’s a time of increasing darkness – literally, as we near the longest night of the year – but it holds the promise of the coming of the light into the world after the winter solstice. For Christians that light is Jesus Christ and the new covenant with God that he represents. We light candles against the darkness on our advent wreath: one more candle each week of advent, until the true light of the world appears in all his glory on Christmas. It’s worth remembering, though, that Advent has been seen as a period of introspection and penitence in preparation not only to celebrate the birth of Christ but also in preparation for his second coming,^{viii} as the gospel reading today reminds us. One account of that second coming is at the end of Matthew, when Jesus describes how the Son of Man, coming in all his glory, will ask whether those considered the least in the human family were fed and clothed and welcomed -- whether they were taken care of and visited when they were sick or in prison -- by those who were more advantaged and had the ability to do so.^{ix}

So Advent (which literally, from its Latin root, means “coming”^x) is not just a message to the warring nations to contemplate their destructive ways, but also to us personally to think about how we’re living: weighed down with the worries of life, or living in anticipation of better times to come that we’re actively working to help bring about. There are three goals I’d suggest we strive for: 1) Savor this Advent season, rather than rushing busily toward a Christmas which will

find us exhausted. 2) Live in anticipation of the light, rather than in fear of the darkness. 3) Be a participant, not an onlooker, in building a new world of justice and righteousness.

Regarding the first goal, how can we not get lost at this time of year in the busyness of plowing through mail order catalogues, going to shopping malls, buying and wrapping presents, and sending Christmas cards, not to mention endless ongoing tasks like car and home repairs, dentist's and doctor's appointments, returning phone calls and e-mails, and doing laundry?^{xi} One of my favorite liturgical writers, the Rev. Virginia Rickeman, who used to serve my sister's church in Minneapolis, has some answers. She insists that we be still and quiet, that we listen and watch and wait, at least for some time every day before we plunge back into the "thicket of our busy hours." She invites us to count up all the love and health and material comfort that we already do have and pour out our glad thanks. She suggests that we call up "memories buried deep within us ... of childhood anticipation and pleasures, remembrances of friends and family members with enduring peculiarities, special talents, and distinctive tastes; thoughts of kitchens and front parlors."^{xii} I would add to her pleas that we here simply open up our orders of service to the page describing seven different holiday concerts in Memorial Church and plan to attend at least two of them, taking long deep breaths and trying to relax as we do so.

Yet, for many of us, there's also a gnawing anxiety that infects us in this post-9/11 world which can often become open fear. As an Anglican priest wrote recently in *Christian Century Magazine*: "Personal fears can become cosmic dread. We see a tower fall and the tower becomes more than a tower. We dread the falling of a world both familiar and dear. Our deepest psyche is shaken, so that the world itself seems to be shaken."^{xiii} He also notes that the vision in today's gospel lesson is far from comforting: "On the earth [there will be] distress among nations...People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world."^{xiv}

We're driven back to our fears about the war in Iraq and about the tinderbox that the Mideast has become in general, about hatred that exists for our country and about increasing terrorism and genocide in a number of areas in the world.

Yet, on this count, both the suffering Jeremiah of the Hebrew Bible and the suffering Jesus of the Gospels are helpful. Jeremiah sees past his current imprisonment and the exile of his people to a time of joy and praise, of reconciliation and understanding, found in the future. The God he knows is both loving and just, and as Martin Luther King later said, "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."^{xv} King as a modern Jeremiah spoke of love as the only answer to humankind's problems – not some "emotional bosh" but "a strong, demanding love" which includes a commitment to nonviolence and to that of God which resides in every person.^{xvi} God is love, as John wrote.^{xvii} A person "who has love has the key that unlocks the door to the meaning of ultimate reality," King explained.^{xviii}

That includes the New Testament understanding that "perfect love casts out fear."^{xix} The real problem with fear is that it is part of a vicious circle of "fear, then hate, then war, and finally deeper hatred," accompanied by even more fear of the other. And the cycle begins again. "Hatred paralyzes life; love releases it. Hatred confuses life; love harmonizes it. Hatred darkens life; love illuminates it."^{xx} "Love your neighbor as yourself,"^{xxi} taught Jesus, but also "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."^{xxii} So Jeremiah and Jesus and Martin Luther King all call us to live lovingly in anticipation of the light, rather than in paralyzing fear of the darkness that may currently surround us.

Finally, that anticipation of the light should have an active dimension, as well as a passive prayerful one that merely helps us become still and quiet – listening and watching and waiting. The Hebrew prophets like Jeremiah and Jesus himself called upon us to be co-creators

with God of a new world of justice and righteousness. “Amend your ways,” urges Jeremiah in the name of God. “Do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood.”^{xxiii} Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome the alien, care for the sick, visit the prisoners, demands Jesus.^{xxiv} And so, we’re encouraged to work with organizations like the Red Cross and the Salvation Army and Goodwill Industries in this Advent season and throughout the year. Social service is not enough, though; we’re also called upon to do political work for social change. I believe we’re challenged to advocate for the legitimate rights of immigrants and prisoners. We’re asked to be active in organizations like Amnesty International, working to eradicate torture in prisons worldwide, and like the National Immigration Law Center, working to protect and promote the rights and opportunities of low-income immigrants and their family members in this country.

So, as we begin the Advent season in the year 2006, I suggest that we take these three steps of 1) savoring the season, rather than losing ourselves in busyness, 2) overcoming our fears of the darkness through love of the light, and 3) working actively to build a new and better world of justice and righteousness.

“O long-expected dawning, come with your cheering ray! Yet, shall the promise beckon, and lead us not astray. O sweet anticipation! It cheers the watchers on: to pray, and hope, and labor, till all our work is done.”^{xxv}

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- ⁱ *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1978), Vol. 4, p. 602.
- ⁱⁱ Luke 21: 27, 34.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Jeremiah 33: 14-16.
- ^{iv} Jane Laurie Borthwick, "Now is the Time Approaching," *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), #144.
- ^v *Oxford Bible Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 515.
- ^{vi} *Concise Columbia Encyclopedia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 416.
- ^{vii} Jeremiah 33: 6-7, 11.
- ^{viii} *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1978), Vol. I, p. 104.
- ^{ix} See Matthew 25: 31-46.
- ^x *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1978), Vol. I, p. 104.
- ^{xi} Virginia Rickeman, *The Well is Deep* (Cleveland, Ohio: United Church Press, 1999), pp. 4-5; see also Malinda Elizabeth Berry, "Blessed Assurance," *Sojourners Magazine* (December, 2006), p. 48.
- ^{xii} Rickeman, *The Well is Deep*, pp. 4-5
- ^{xiii} Herbert O'Driscoll, "Pent-up Power," *Christian Century Magazine* online at www.christiancentury.org/article.lasso?id=1735
- ^{xiv} Luke 21: 25-26.
- ^{xv} Martin Luther King, Jr., "Where Do We Go From Here?" (1967) in James M. Washington (ed.), *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), p. 252.
- ^{xvi} *Ibid.*, p. 250.
- ^{xvii} 1 John 4:8.
- ^{xviii} King, "Where Do We Go," p. 250.
- ^{xix} 1 John 4: 18.
- ^{xx} Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Strength to Love* (1963),) in James M. Washington (ed.), *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), pp. 513-514.
- ^{xxi} Mark 12: 31; Matthew 22: 39; Luke 10: 27.
- ^{xxii} Matthew 5: 44.
- ^{xxiii} Jeremiah 7: 5-6.
- ^{xxiv} See Matthew 25: 31-46.
- ^{xxv} Jane Laurie Borthwick, "Now is the Time Approaching," *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), #144.