

LIVING IN THE END TIMES
A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
University Public Worship
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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 waiting in the end times that will culminate when, as Jeremiah puts it, there shall be “justice and righteousness in the land.”ⁱⁱⁱ As we sang in the opening hymn, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel...bind all peoples in one heart and mind; make envy, strife and quarrels cease; fill the whole the whole world with heaven’s peace.”^{iv}

Where are we in relation to that notion of the end of time? Carnage continues in Syria and other countries like Afghanistan and Sudan. 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 in a fragile truce between modern Israel and the state of Palestine, which was formally recognized on Thursday by the United Nations General Assembly. Yet, Jeremiah was not speaking in particularly auspicious times either. He was confined in prison in Jerusalem by the Jewish King, Zedekiah, while the Babylonian army was besieging the city more than 2,500 years ago.^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} Well, we have been living in the end times for a long time.

Advent has always had two sides. It’s a time of increasing darkness – literally, as we near the longest night near the end 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 at the end of time,^{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 re-consider 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 when living in these end times: 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 catalogues and online resources, 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 e-mails and phone calls, paying bills, 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'd add to her pleas that we here simply open up our orders of service to pages 12-15, look at the four different concerts and singing events here 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, secondly, for many of us, there's also a gnawing anxiety that infects us in this terror-ridden world, which can often become open fear. As an Anglican priest wrote in *Christian Century Magazine*: "Personal fears can become cosmic dread. [Thinking back to 9/11] 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 understanding of what it's like to live in the end times 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 endless wars – in particular in the tinderbox of the biblical lands of the Mideast – as well as about the hatred that exists for our country in so much of 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 we’re told in the Bible. A person “who has love has the key that unlocks the door to the meaning of ultimate reality,” King explained.^{xvii}

That includes the New Testament understanding that “perfect love casts out fear.”^{xviii} 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 goes around and around. “Hatred paralyzes life; love releases it. Hatred confuses life; love harmonizes it. Hatred darkens life; love illuminates it.”^{xix} “Love your neighbor as yourself,”^{xx} taught Jesus, but also “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”^{xxi} So Jeremiah and Jesus and Martin Luther King all call upon us to live lovingly in anticipation of the light, rather than in paralyzing fear of the darkness that may currently surround us.

Thirdly, 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.”^{xxii} Feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome the alien, care for the sick, visit the prisoners, demands Jesus.^{xxiii} 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 prisoners and immigrants, for example. 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 2012, I suggest that we take these three steps: 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.

“Clear out the cluttered heart, lest like the crowded inn, there is no room, no way to part a path to let Christ in. Then use the opened space for faith, for hope, for prayer, for nurturing a life of grace toward strangers needing care.”^{xxiv}

BENEDICTION

This Advent, O God, may we break the patterns which bind us to small commitments and to the stale answers we have given to questions of no importance. Let the Advent trumpet blow; let the walls of our defenses crumble, and make a place in our lives for the freshness of your love, well lived in Jesus the Christ. AMEN.

(Adapted from John W. Vannorsdall)

NOTES

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- ⁱ *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1978), Vol. 4, p. 602.
- ⁱⁱ Luke 21: 27, 34.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Jeremiah 33: 14-16.
- ^{iv} John Mason Neale and Henry Sloane Coffin (translators), “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” *Psalterium Canticum Catholicarum* (1710).
- ^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} King, “Where Do We Go,” p. 250.
- ^{xviii} 1 John 4: 18.
- ^{xix} 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.
- ^{xx} Mark 12: 31; Matthew 22: 39; Luke 10: 27.
- ^{xxi} Matthew 5: 44.
- ^{xxii} Jeremiah 7: 5-6.
- ^{xxiii} See Matthew 25: 31-46.
- ^{xxiv} Thomas H. Troeger, “Clear Out the Cluttered Heart” (2009).