



Sermon

Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36
November 29, 2009
1st Sunday of Advent
Historic St. George's United Methodist Church
Rev. Alfred T. Day III

Bring On the Candles

I was working in the back yard late one afternoon last week – say about 3:30. Typical overcast November day. Time to clean out all the flower pots and bring them inside. Roll up the hose. Clean up leaves and branches. You know the drill. Working the time away, I didn't notice at first, but then I couldn't help it. It got dark. DARK. All of a sudden! Hard-to-see-any-more, dark. I looked at my watch. It was barely 5 o'clock. It kind of snuck up on me. Suddenly, it was like the middle of the night but it was barely supper time.

Have you ever been surprised by how dark it gets and how quickly?

The onset of darkness is when the Christian season called Advent begins. The most expectant, hopeful season on the Christian calendar starts in the witching hours.

At the beginning of the service today, when I lit the first candle on the Advent wreath, it was not a moment too soon. This Advent, there is an urgent a need for some new light. I don't mean to go gloom, despair and agony on you, especially after a warm, wonderful Thanksgiving, but Lord have mercy! We have not been able to extricate ourselves from a war in Iraq and this week, our president will tell us we're sending 30-40,000 new troops to Afghanistan. This hits close to home: one from our church community will likely wind up there. Some of us have been out of work. Others still are. The debate over the critical issues of our time is so divisive, vitriolic, lacking civility, human decency even, that it's hard to see a path for leaders coming together to forge a positive way forward. Meanwhile, some CEOs and the bankers who made the economic mess

we're in get big bonuses, while millions can't afford health insurance. A little light from somewhere, please!

There appears to be some hope. I'm just not sure the kind that finds folks pitching tents outside Wal-Mart or trampling over each another to get the best buy on a flat screen TV bigger than a bay window is what we're really looking for.

Here's another odd thing. The way the church keeps its calendar; this is the first Sunday of a new year. How do we ring it in? With apocalypse, that's how. We begin our preparations for the coming of the Christ child with a heart stopping passage about the end of the world. "It will seem like all hell has broken loose," Jesus says in Luke. "The sun, moon, stars, earth and sea in and uproar and everyone all over the world in a panic, the wind knocked out of them by the threat of doom, the powers that be quaking..." (Luke 21:25-27 The Message.) Happy New Year!

That kind of talk is enough to send a person under the bed WITH lots of covers.

But this Advent, I am holding on to the reassurance that God intends to make the world right again. I'm holding on to the reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, the Book of Jeremiah: "The time is coming – God's decree – when I will keep the promise," says the Lord through the prophet. "I will make a fresh and true shoot sprout from the David-Tree. Honesty and fairness will rule. Things will be set right." (Jeremiah 33:14-16 The Message.)

With God, says the prophet, a promise made is a promise kept. Given the mess the world was in

when Jeremiah lived, I don't know how he was able to see anything hopeful. But somehow he was sustained by the conviction that the outcome of history was in the hands of God, who could be trusted to make corrupt Jerusalem, and all the powers-that-be, a haven of safety and center for salvation.

When you flip through the channels on TV, do you ever stop and listen to any of the so-called biblical prophecy preachers, the ones always talking about the second coming of Jesus? Any given Sunday, not to mention most days of the week, the TV is rife with these end-of-time preachers with intricate charts and detailed outlines of biblical clues and cues leading to guesstimates for the great and terrible day of the Lord. They make my head spin worse than logarithms did back when I ducked every math course I possibly could.

Something I notice about their message is this: what they say is motivated LESS by any hope for the world, any human development or transformation and MORE about those considered God's UNfavored or UNfavorite getting their just desserts. Why not publish a bumper sticker that says: SMILE! Jesus love me but he can't stand you. Or SMILE! My God is a Consuming Fire. And You're Toast!

This promise of the advent of the Son of man the gospel talks about, is it about bad news for some or good news for all? The way I see it, Jesus, here in Luke says it will be a fearful thing for just about everyone. But then adds: "When all this starts to happen, up on your feet! Stand tall. Hold your head high! Help is on the way." (Luke 21:28 *The Message.*)

What an unusual blend of warning and comfort. Bad news for some or good news for all? I'm going with the good news for all.

A friend was telling me about having cataract surgery. Days before the procedure there were all these different kinds of drops to put into his eyes. The drops came with complex instructions and dire warnings putting the "fear of God" into him lest he do anything wrong. Maybe you've had the type medical procedure or testing with

complex instructions and warning of deadly consequences too.

After the procedure, my friend said the instructions were just as serious. Don't sleep in your back. Don't dare pick anything up. Don't bend over. Don't come near touching your eye. Don't, don't, don't! Or you may never see again. Yet, behind it all, my friend sensed a deep caring and compassion of the surgeon and the nursing staff who called every day for the first five days after the operation.

I'm thinking Jesus had the same thing in mind when he spoke about the end of the world then reassured his followers with the parable about a fig tree: "Look at a fig tree. Any tree for that matter," he said. "When the leaves begin to show, one look tells you summer is right around the corner. The same here – when you see these things happen, you know God's kingdom is about here. (Luke 21: 29-32, *The Message*)

Maybe Jesus' talk of coming back, riding the clouds is a sort of cataract surgery for the way he wants his followers to see things. He wants us to be able to see things as they are and not out of focus. He also wants us to take the long view towards the arrival of a world marked by God's justice and righteousness.

No one ever expressed hope for the advent of Jesus more clearly in sermons and speeches than Martin Luther King Jr. In one of them he said: "I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word." Until then, we are bound by faith not to have our hope and vision too distorted by the worries of this life. There is too much work to do. Too much watchful anticipation and watchful readiness to keep.

Do you know the word *prolepsis*? It's one of those words, in my case learned in seminary, via theological studies; one of those words you think you'll memorize for a test then quickly forget. Not so with *prolepsis*, especially during Advent. (And who knows, if you're ever a contestant on Who Wants to be a Millionaire this word is bound to be in the big bucks range. So listen up.)

Prolepsis is all about acting like what you hope or expect to happen will happen or has already

happened. You've heard of flashback. Prolepsis is flash-forward. Visioning.

Mahatma Gandhi is quoted as saying "Be the change you want to see in the world." That's prolepsis.

I saw a wonderful video clip on YouTube from India made to bring Gandhi's famous quote to life. A large tree has fallen and blocks a busy intersection. Cars full of people trying to get to work, buses with children trying to get to school, ambulances trying to get to hospital, merchants trying to get to market, police trying to get to distresses – all stuck. The traffic police throw up their arms. A holy man offers prayers and incantations. People scream into their cell phones. It's impossible to turn around. There is no way forward.

Until... a little child, school bag in hand, walks through the paralyzed, angry crowd to the massive tree blocking the road. The child approaches the roadblock, puts down his schoolbag, begins to push, push and push. Soon other children join in. Then others – youth and adults. Others still, police and truckers, men and women. The obstacle begins to move. Soon there is enough energy and force to lift the obstacle out of the way.

A little boy with a book bag threw himself into acting the change he wanted to see and soon, person after person, one after another followed. Prolepsis. What's that verse about "... and a little child shall lead them" in Isaiah? An advent scripture, by the way.

Did you watch the CNN Hero program, Thanksgiving Night? (If not, go find it and watch!) ONE breast cancer survivor with thankfulness for health insurance providing early detection of her cancer, and passion for women who would never benefit from the same because of their poverty; this one woman was the fresh seed, true sprout and new shoot for free breast cancer screening. Now vans take free mammograms to thousands in poor communities in her city. ONE homeless Iraq war vet consumed by drugs and alcohol in his post traumatic stress was the fresh seed, true sprout and new shoot founding "Stand Down

House," helping hundreds of vets in his home town. More than 90% of them are off the street and in jobs. ONE bar tender heard that lack of drinkable water killed nearly as many as AIDS or malaria. So he came out from behind the bar to be the fresh seed, true sprout and new shoot for his "Wine to Water" project digging wells and delivering potable water sources to Darfur and other draught ridden countries.

I like this kind of reality TV. Call it new reality TV. Call it God's reality TV.

These are just a few stories among dozens the program showed. Efran Penaflores of the Philippines knew his way out of poverty and gang violence had been via education. So he built a mobile school on a push cart, teaching in communities with no schools. Telling his story, he quoted Gandhi. "You are the change you dream of." This child of the streets, this slumdog without the millions added: "The hero in you is waiting to be born." Another child born in a stable couldn't have said it or lived it any better.

Closer to home, here in historic Old City and Independence Hall National Park, I came across this story about the meeting of a branch of the colonial legislature. There was to be an eclipse of the sun. It caught the politicians and leaders off guard. In the midst of all the confusion and jam up over what to do, there was a motion to adjourn. Thankfully, one of the legislators stood up and said: "Mr. Speaker, if it is not the end of the world and we adjourn, we shall appear to be fools. If it is the end of the world, I choose to be doing my duty. I move sir, let the candles be brought."

Let the candles be brought.

Ever been surprised at how dark it gets and how quickly?

Bring on the candles, the Advent candles. Ignite some prolepsis. Dutifully watch the fig trees for signs of life. And for God's sake let's live in vision and hope until Jesus comes again

■■■ Amen ■■■