

Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church
Reverend Dr. Daris Bultena

November 29, 2009
First Sunday of Advent

Jeremiah 33:14-16

¹⁴The 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. ¹⁵In 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. ¹⁶In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."

Luke 21:25-36

²⁵"There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. ²⁶People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. ²⁸Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

²⁹Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; ³⁰as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. ³¹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³²Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. ³³Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³⁴"Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, ³⁵like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

"A Flicker of Starlight Hope"

Sometimes it is just too much. Did you have the perfect Thanksgiving? You know the perfect Thanksgiving where everyone was so wonderfully happy and everything came out just as it should. The gravy was great and the family was heavenly. Did you want to just lock that

moment in and keep it forever because it was like that Norman Rockwell painting where all is well and in its place as it all should be?

Oh, was that your experience? It was not mine. And truth be told, I bet it was not yours either. It was not that I had a bad Thanksgiving. There was no horrible turkey trauma. But, it was not perfect either. It was, well, it was okay. It was.

Every family has their issues. Every time we think of holidays and families or even friends, we tend to have these ideas of how it should be. We have seen enough television and watched enough Hallmark movies to know that it is all supposed to be happy and light.

Yet—for most of us that is not the experience. Most of us end up somewhere other than the land of everything as we would dream it and more live in the land of the misfit toys.

The same is true of Christmas. There are plenty of messages out there that tell us this is the season to get ready for Christmas. If we will but buy the right gifts and decorate the proper tree and hang the most balanced, attractive, and fresh wreath on the front door—oh then things will come together in a way that makes it perfect.

The problem is, we know the truth. We know that there is no such thing as the perfect Christmas. We know that no amount of retail therapy or great buy on a digital camera will fill us up on the inside and make us whole. No perfectly decorated house or finely hosted party will answer the struggles we have going on within.

And then when we look broader than what is under the tree we cannot help but see that we are living in an age where our culture is really

angry. We live in an angry culture and it spills over into our relationships too. The anger and even the violence that is part of our culture permeates every aspect of that culture.

It is palpable in such a way that we can see it almost everywhere we go. Did you go out shopping on Friday? While I did not go for any 5AM “door buster deals,” I did end up going to two stores later in the day. The one, a major shopping venue, there did not seem much “holiday spirit” going on in the parking lot. There was sort of a contest, if you will, for who could get to the open parking spot first. I got cut off twice over a parking space?

It has become an every person for themselves world. And so we don’t just end up cut off in the parking lot but on the highway too. We end up cut off and cut down and too often we are the ones doing the cutting off and the cutting down and not giving it a second thought for how we are treating our neighbors.

We hoard things for ourselves. We seem on edge all the time. We no longer get enraged when we hear that someone else was killed in our city. And when there is gunfire in our neighborhood we do not even call the police because we don’t want to get involved. What is it about?

What is it all about?

Despair! I think we are in despair!

They were—the people that Jeremiah is directly writing about. Here they were in exile. Exile is not a pretty place. Hauled off away from all

that you know and absent from all that is familiar—it is not a very comfortable place to be. The anxiety was high. All that they had known and understood was gone. It was all disappearing. Before too long there would be no memory of how things used to be—it was all changing.

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It was the same situation for those who were with Jesus in that last week before the crucifixion. They thought he was to be a political power. They thought he was to be a force to be reckoned with. They thought so—but it sure was not how he thought and definitely not what he taught.

He told them to be awake and to beware. He told them to be on guard and to get ready. He told them to look around and open their eyes and see what was going on. They were all facing really huge changes in their lives—more immediately than any of them could imagine or conceive.

Jesus called them to open their eyes and do what Jeremiah called them to do—to lift up their heads and to see what is happening all around them.

What is happening? It was not a perfect Thanksgiving! It was not a perfect Christmas either! It was more like the parking lot with everyone cutting each other off and cutting each other down. Magnify that—and look it in the face and what do you have? Despair!

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You have despair. Where justice and righteousness are absent – that is despair.

Despair – yes, I call it despair. I believe that is what we face. You may want to challenge me on that and tell me that it is not quite that bad—things are just different now than they used to be. Try and tell me

that it is because I am getting old and I am remembering the good ole days when things were different than they are now. Such is not despair you may argue...

You may argue that...but I call it despair because something is happening. That something is a silent acceptance for how things are.

We have come to this silent acceptance that it is what it is. It is what it is and it will be as it will be. We quietly acquiesce to the movement of our culture and figure we can't fight it. It is what it is!

See, whenever we get to that point when we say that, or operate from that perspective of things are as they are and they are fixed—oh, that is despair. Despair is the place from which there is a conspicuous absence of theological hope.

Get that—despair is the place from which there is an absence of theological hope. We humans have met despair when we cannot imagine God's promised alternative future.

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That was the deal there in Jerusalem with the followers of Jesus—the days were surely coming when all would be different. Could they imagine it? Could they conceive of it? Could they dream of it and claim it before the fig tree spouted new leaves?

That was also the situation there in exile. Could the hearers of Jeremiah's oracles and Jeremiah's prophecies perceive that this was not the end of things? Could they open their minds and hearts and especially their hopes to a place where God was bringing about something new for them? Could they?

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It is in that face of despair that I invite us be this Advent. The culture wants to make this time before Christmas only a feel good time. It wants this time to be a time where we decorate and tie things up nice with a great big red bows and look past all the suffering and hurt and injustice in the world.

But that is not Advent—Advent invites something else. It invites us to see a place beyond. It invites us to see a place—not a pie in the sky by and by—but it invites us to see a place where even here and on this soil all is utterly changed by the alternative future that God offers and is bringing about.

Here is what I say do: Close your eyes. Close them fast. Close them hard. Don't gently let your eyelids shut. No. Close your eyes hard and fast. What do you see?

What do you see when you do that? Do you see that flicker of light? Do you see it? Do you see that flicker of a candle raging against the darkness? Do you see that flicker of starlight shining in the night?

It is there. If you cannot see it—shut your eyes harder and faster. Push them into your head and look—look and see that flicker of starlight hope that is there.

Advent is the season where we are to do a kind of seeing that involves the strenuous and crucial Christian task of imagination. We are to imagine a future that is removed from our current circumstances—it is a promised future that seems oh so removed from how things are now.

It seems so removed, because it is removed from where we are now. Advent is this season—not just of pre-Christmas but of claiming the reality

of Christmas that we have already seen and know this God of ours to be a God that keeps promise. This is a God who has already brought hope out of despair—and we can trust that in our time too.

See it. Imagine it. Imagine a future where it is utterly changed. Imagine that future where the injustice is gone and where righteousness is the order of the day. Righteousness is that kind of living that accords with God's purposes.

Close your eyes and imagine that flicker of starlight hope.

Then lean in—yes lean it. Do not be afraid to name the injustices and sufferings of this age. Do not be afraid to name those difficulties and the pain that is there as we grapple with the living of this life and even this season---and as we do that—as we name those things lean in. Lean into God's alternative future. Lean into a world that conducts its way based on love over greed. Lean into a place where peace is the motivation that connects humanity.

Dare to lean into God's view of the world that can be—oh it is a world that not only can be, but a world that will be.

A flicker of starlight hope. Imagine it. Lean into it. And posture into it.

What does it mean to posture yourself? It means that you actually move. It means that we contort and conform ourselves in such a way that we become the very flicker of starlight hope for the world.

Imagine. Lean. Posture. –It is this very movement, this very flicker that makes us alive in this world. Imagine. Lean into God’s future. Posture yourself as part of the new reality.

Amen.