

Sermon: The Days Are Surely Coming

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36**

The first Sunday of Advent marks the beginning of a new church year. For the next few weeks, our readings will come from the prophetic literature to underscore the importance of waiting, anticipating, looking ahead to and trusting in a hopeful future despite periodic difficult circumstances. In the Gospel readings, all from Luke, the lectionary tells the story backwards, beginning with Jesus talking about the end of the age today and only getting to Mary and her unexpected pregnancy in week four.

Advent purposely messes with our sense of time in order to point out the different ways in which God enters into history. It is *meant* to be disruptive and disorderly.

Right off the bat, we're dropped into the middle of a situation with Jeremiah. Making a long story short, the context for this passage is that the people had violated their covenant with God and then paid the price when the Babylonian army came through, dismantled Jerusalem, exiled most of the elites in town to Babylon, and ushered in 50 years of despair.

Despair is characterized by the absence of hope, in this case, the hope of God's promised future. During this upheaval, the people lost everything; it was over. The Temple was gone, the city destroyed, and the people dispersed.

Here's a thing about covenants with God – on God's side, they are unbreakable, and unbroken. It's we who break them. This is what happened in Jerusalem and Israel – the people broke the covenant. The biggest disaster that could possibly happen happened, but now, Jeremiah said, everything is going to be okay again.

So, fifty years after the disaster, and after much praying and repenting, the improbable occurs – Persia, the up-and-coming power in the ancient near east, defeated the current champ, Babylon, and who do you think had a hand in that?

Up to now, Jeremiah has been preaching that the people's sins were the root cause of all the destruction, and he wasn't wrong. But now we're at a turning point.

The phrase, ‘The days are surely coming’ appears repeatedly throughout Jeremiah’s writings, and it implies ‘someday soon but not yet.’ He knows there’s no specific timetable before these things will come to pass, but they will come to pass.

Today, Jeremiah shifts gears from doom and gloom to tell those in the midst of their suffering that God will in fact provide comfort and hope by fulfilling a past promise.

In Luke’s Gospel, we get a different angle on the end times, different from Mark. Mark’s Gospel connected the end times with the destruction of the Temple and wars and rumors of war. Luke is vague about it, saying only that there will be obvious and unmistakable signs. Luke’s Jesus says be alert and pray for strength.

He also says that ‘*people* will faint from fear and foreboding.’ Which people? Not Christ followers. This is another example of an English translation steamrolling the intent of the original language. The typical Greek word for ‘world’ is *kosmos*, but Luke doesn’t use it here.

Instead, the word he used, *oikoumene*, refers particularly to the political and economic realms of the world and sometimes even signifies the Roman Empire. So, the Second Coming of the Son of Man will threaten only those people who have abused their authority and not cared for the poor, the widows and orphans, and so on.

In the same vein, which *generation* did Jesus have in mind? His? Ours?

In Noah’s time, it was ‘this generation’ of people who turned to violence and corruption that caused all the trouble (Genesis 7:1). In Luke, ‘this generation’ includes those who rejected God’s purpose for them (7:30-31); it includes those who asked for a sign but ignored Jesus who was standing right in front of them (11:29-32); it includes the ones who rejected God’s messengers (11:49-51) and those who rejected the Son of Man (17:25). In other words, those kinds of people will be around until the end of time, and they will always be hostile to the Good News.

We don’t usually think too much about the end times, unless we’re in a pandemic, mostly because there are more important things to worry about that affect us right now, like a pandemic.

Waiting might be the one thing we do best and most often. We wait to see our doctor; we wait for test results after seeing the doctor; we wait all day for the cable guy to arrive, but then he doesn’t. How often has my wife heard me say, “Who cares about the

end times, when's the pizza going to get here?" Waiting not only tends to induce anxiety, but it also busies our brains with dark imaginings of future events beyond our control.

Our fear of unforeseen events, what Donald Rumsfeld once called, the 'unknown unknowns,' sometimes gets the better of us. The boxer Muhammed Ali once said, 'The future is a mist,' and he left it at that. The baseball player Mickey Rivers once said, "Ain't no sense in worryin."

We live in a most challenging time. The future will always be beyond our control, but an uncertain future need not dominate the present.

During the Exile, the people discovered that God was with them everywhere, and that the Temple was not the only place to find God.

For Jeremiah, the future is now, and God was about to fulfill a past promise, literally 'the good word' made to Israel and Judah. In the restoration after the Exile, Jerusalem will be called 'The Lord is our righteousness,' and 'righteousness' refers to living in a humble way according to God's purpose for us.

Jesus' followers need the reminder that God is faithful, that God has not forgotten them, and that the Good News stands when everything else falls. Jesus promised that 'all these things will take place' and that we'll know the Coming of the Son of Man as surely as we'll know that Spring has sprung. In the meantime, he said, don't let the worries of life weigh you down.

A theologian named Robert Gnuse wrote that 'God comes to us in ways we do not expect, and showers us with grace, if only we have the eyes of faith to see it.'¹ Jesus said, 'Be on guard; be alert at all times,' because you never know.

The good news is, we don't have to save the world; God will do that. What we are called to do is make our communities, our homes, even our workplaces more humane, more purposeful, 'more better,' if you will, for our having been part of it. God will be right beside us, guiding us, giving us strength and confidence to live into the promise.

Jesus calls us to stand up and raise our heads, because our redemption is drawing near. In fact, it is always here, in Jesus Christ, our Emmanuel, born 2000 years ago, 'who was, is coming, and who is among us now.'

Amen.

¹ Redditt, Paul L, Robert Karl Gnuse, S Suzanne Mayer, Susan Langhauser, Don Hawks, Edward N McNulty, Paul Scott Wilson, and Brett Younger. 2012. "First Sunday of Advent: December 2, 2012." *Lectionary Homiletics* 24 (1): 2.