

“IN THOSE DAYS”

JEREMIAH 33: 14-16; I THESSALONIANS 3: 9-13; LUKE 21: 25-36

NOVEMBER 29, 2009 – THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Eugene H. Winkler, Pastor

If you can remember where you were on September 11, 2001 when the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were crashed into by terrorists and another plane crashed in Pennsylvania, hold up your hand. If you can remember where you were on November 22, 1963, when President Kennedy was killed, hold up your hand. Now let's get a little dicier. You may not want to hold up your hand if you can remember where you were on December 7, 1941 when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor? Anybody remember November 11, 1918 when Armistice was declared between the Allies and the Central Powers?

Although I am confident nobody here was alive on June 19, 1865, it is a day that African Americans celebrate in thirty-two states. Juneteenth remembers that day when word reached the State of Texas that slavery had been abolished in the United States. While I grant you that we were not alive on that fateful day, still it has been so ingrained in our memories that we can readily recount its stories. As William Faulkner said, “For a Southerner the past is not dead. It's not even past.”

I have a theory derived from Thomas Lynch in his wonderful book, *The Undertaking: Notes from the Dismal Trade*. Mr. Lynch is a poet/undertaker/essayist who lives in Milford, Michigan. He is a delightful, literate Christian whose books are, as a *New York Times* reviewer noted, not written to make “secular humanists” comfortable. The theory is based loosely on the unremarkable observation that the old are always looking back with longing while the young with the same longing look ahead.

The past is a province the aged revisit and the future is a land that the young dream of. And midlife is the point between them—that frontier when life's perspective could go either way, when our view is as good on either side. The old write memoirs—well, it seems that everyone of every age is writing some kind of memoir these days—the young do resumes. But in midlife our diary entries begin with a discussion of the weather. The present is where we live, equidistant from birth and death.

In his drinking days Mr. Lynch used to expound on his theory something like this: Think of your life as America. You emerge from the womb at Ellis Island. The language is unknown to you. You don't understand the food, the customs. You head west, dreaming of gold and a glamorous future. Somewhere in Pennsylvania you meet a girl. You pick up some smarts by the time you get to Ohio. You may stray from the path toward Memphis or you may go northward into Michigan for a while, but you keep heading west. California is where the streets are paved with gold, Hollywood and the City of Angels.

By the time you cross the river in St. Louis, the girl you met in the Poconos has decided that you are a bit dull and you find yourself traveling alone. You move on. By the time you get to Kansas, you're at midlife. The horizon seems endless on either side. You can see for miles, you are balanced between the Bronx and Santa Barbara. What's behind you look a lot like what lies ahead.

So, the theory goes: when you are in the Kansas of your life—and it has nothing to do with chronological age—you can recognize the terrain of the past and still see that you’re just about halfway toward your destination. Double your age and you can figure out when you’re going to die. If you are forty when that moment happens, count your blessings, save more, pick names for your great grandchildren. If you are fifty when you reach that midpoint, even better. But if you have reached that midpoint in life when you are looking back with nostalgia and you’re only, say, thirty-two, you may die early.

Before you get too enamored of this theory, consider today’s first lesson for the First Sunday of Advent. The prophet Jeremiah writes about the future: “The 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. In 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.” Or consider the apocalyptic words that Luke’s Gospel attributes to Jesus: “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations...”

These words fly in the face of all those who throughout Christian history have declared that they have deciphered exactly when the Messiah will return. According to Luke, all you can count on from Jesus is strange language and parables about fig trees. Nobody knows when the Messiah will return, we do not know when any of us will die. And yet we do have a lot of information about how to stay alive. We have the most overweight population in the Western world, but eating out is still our favorite sport. We have the highest infant mortality rate of any industrialized country in the world, yet we ignore the problems of poverty. It is not only true that heart disease is the worst epidemic since the Great Plagues of the fourteenth century, but it’s also true that one in three Americans will contract some form of cancer. Yet we continue to eat the wrong foods, be flooded with killer chemicals, live under too much stress, don’t get enough exercise and ignore the threat of global warming and greenhouse gases.

Both Jeremiah and Luke call us to be alert for God’s signs. Time is what we never have enough of. We live in the tension between “not enough time” and “time on my hands.” Advent is a season in which God calls us to look at our time and our calling and our money in a different light. “People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world,” says Jesus, “for the powers of the heavens will be shaken” (Luke 21:38).

Advent is also a dangerous time because it can easily drop into the pit of sentimentality. Our feelings get all gooey and sweet and we forget the world for which Jesus came. Several years ago I made the mistake of attacking the religious right and Rush Limbaugh in a Christmas Eve sermon. An outraged woman wrote me an angry letter: “I come to church only twice a year, and I expect it to be a pleasant experience. You ruined Christmas for me!”

Herb Miller told the story of an insurance agent who also owned a farm. He told his friend that all the cotton in his county had been wiped out by a recent hail storm. The friend said, “Your crop was insured, of course.”

“Well, no,” the insurance agent sheepishly replied.

“Your neighbors crops were not insured either?” the friend asked. “Most of them were.”

Playing a hunch, the friend asked, “Who did they buy their insurance from?”

The agent answered miserably, “Me.”

Advent is a time to remember what is important, and what is important is not just about us and our feelings and our vision of reality.

The 1563 Heidelberg Catechism’s first question is “What is your only comfort in life and death?” The answer is “That I am not my own but belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.”

Our calling as Christians is to live quiet, humble, self-sacrificing, loving lives. And that is very, very hard to do in a culture obsessed with fame and celebrity and self-aggrandizement. Just consider this week’s headlines. First, we have Michaela and Tareq Salahi sneaking into a state dinner at the White House. For what purpose? So that she, Michaela can get on a television show about celebrities, “The Real Housewives of D.C.” Two weeks ago the celebrities du jour were Richard and Mayumi Heene, the parents of Falcon, the Balloon Boy; they had appeared twice previously on ABC’s reality show “Wife Swap” and became addicted to celebrity. Needed more. Needed a way to get their names in even bigger headlines, get booked on Larry King’s show.

John Hinckley said he shot Ronald Reagan to impress the actress Jody Foster. Mark David Chapman told his first parole board hearing in 2000 that he shot and killed John Lennon to get noticed. (“I was feeling like I was worthless, and maybe the root of it is a self-esteem issue...I felt if I shot him, I would become something, which is not true at all.”)

Not true at all. What makes you feel worth something? It’s a vital question for each of us, for every person who professes Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. And it’s a very tough question in a culture which defines you only when you attain Andy Warhol’s “fifteen minutes of fame.”

When we consider what it means for us to live as did Jeremiah’s people amid death and the threat of death, amid homelessness and violence, amid terror and uncertainty, amid loss of jobs and loss even of a place to live, despair is a valid reaction. Yet, while despair is among the most human of human conditions, it cannot be fully understood apart from its theological implications. Reinhold Niebuhr associated despair with our failed attempts to procure security for ourselves, optimistically pretending to that we are not subject to the vicissitudes of life. Despair is characterized primarily by the conspicuous absence of faith in God. We meet despair when we cannot imagine God’s alternative future. Therefore, perhaps we should not judge too harshly those who seek to get a place on the inane Larry King’s television show. Perhaps we should pray that they will find hope.

The eschatological promises of Jeremiah’s Little Book of Comfort, as chapters thirty through thirty-three have been called since Martin Luther, offer us a different historical reality. They are spoken to give hope to a crushed people and inspire faithful endurance of the present circumstance. God is assuring the people that God will fulfill “the promise,” literally “the good word” with a definite article—not “a” promise, not one of many, but a particular one made to both the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

With the world that he has known crumbling around him, Jeremiah pushes his people to see a future, God's future, which seems laughable given the circumstances of exile and the destruction of Jerusalem, the deportation of the people to Babylon and the loss of the Davidic monarchy. Like Jeremiah's people, we look back with nostalgia on the days before September 11, 2001, on the days in the 1960s when University Church was different from what it is now, on the days when. . . Well, my friends, I point you to the histories of University Church and South Church for verification. Eleanor Campbell points out again and again years with budget deficits, struggling in the midst of prosperity to pay our bills. God is calling us past nostalgia into the future because like the people to whom Jeremiah spoke, we live in the present and the future—not the past.

As the first lone candle on the Advent wreath burns, Jeremiah recalls his own city burning, and yet he speaks not of destruction but of God's future. I think of the Spanish word *anhelo* which means longing. Every one of us has a list of *anhelo*, the longings of our lives. Advent is the time when the church can no longer contain its unfulfilled desire and so we sing, O come, O come, Emmanuel and wait. And wait.

Jeremiah is speaking to people who live in exile or who are anticipating it. And he offers them a vision of a radically new way that their political and religious institutions may work in the future. God will bring justice and righteousness rather than exploitation and self-promotion and violence.

Righteousness is not a word you and I use very often, but it is one of the first words of the language of Advent. In Matthew's Gospel, "righteousness" is Jesus' first word, spoken to John the Baptist when the Baptizer objects to Jesus' request to be baptized: "Let it be so now...in this way to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt. 3:15). Righteousness is not a standard of action. It refers to conduct in accord with God's purposes. It is doing the good thing, the right thing. Simple as that.

However, the problem with the church all too often is not righteousness but self-righteousness. Self-righteousness is the inflated ego of self approval. "Look at how good I am. Pay attention. If you want to know what it means to be a good person, moi! Righteousness on the other hand is the humble ethic of living toward others in just and loving relationships.

Do you remember that scene near the end of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* in which Harry confesses his fear that he really belongs in Slytherin House with all the Dark wizards? After all, doesn't he speak Parseltongue (snake language) just like Lord Voldemort? Doesn't he share several of Voldemort's personality traits? Don't they even *look* alike? But to this fearful puzzlement Albus Dumbledore, the wise headmaster of Hogwarts, replies, "It is our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities."

Harry has received nothing but neglect from his adoptive parents, the Dursleys. Yet in Harry's situation this is also a benefit, because that neglect prevents him from thinking that he's important. It trains him in humility. If Harry had been raised as his cousin Dudley was—coddled, praised, every good action overrewarded and every act of cruelty or neglect excused—he would have been much easier prey for Voldemort's message of pride and power.

It is our choices that show what we truly are—far more than our abilities.

Jeremiah echoes the words of Joshua on that fateful day when he calls the Hebrews (chapter 24) to remember God's call. "Choose this day whom you will serve...As for me and my house, we will serve God!"