

First Presbyterian Church Wausau, WI
Living Expectantly – Advent 1 – November 29, 2015
Luke 21:25-36
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Whether we like it or not, we have entered into that time of year when one little four letter word can exact a variety of reactions. Now I haven't lived here long enough to know for sure how Wisconsinites react, but I know how Hoosiers do. We talk about it in our families, at our jobs, with other motorists at the gas station while we're filling up, or while standing in line at the post office. We check out the evening news for the slightest hint of what is to come. As the daylight hours get shorter and shorter each day, we wonder when it will finally hit. The first significant snowfall of the season. And strangely enough, we're still waiting. But we know the snow is coming.

People down south react to snow different ways. Some respond with surprise and panic, as if they've forgotten what winter is like. They're simply not ready. They have to run to the store last minute to buy groceries, stocking up on bread, eggs and milk. They scramble off to the gas station to fill up a tank that is hovering near empty. They hurry to the hardware store to grab a snow shovel and ice for the sidewalk. Barely a step ahead, they prepare for the coming snow with stress and anxiety.

There are a few who overreact. They sit with their eyes glued to the Weather Channel, trying to predict the exact moment of the first snowflake. Updating their Facebook status every few minutes. They call all their friends and relatives, with dire warnings of harsh blizzards to come, and then are disappointed when the storm of the century never arrives.

There are others who react with cynicism. These folks scoff at those who are scurrying around making preparations, skeptical of the forecast of the so-called experts. They don't believe the prediction. Those weather analysts never get it right. The snow will be far north or west of us, like it always is. They say, I won't believe it till I see the flakes falling from the sky with my very own eyes. And of course by then, it will be too late for the scoffers to prepare.

And then there are those who listen to the forecast with mild interest. They react with neither anxiety nor cynicism. They knew that winter was on the way. They saw the signs. You know, the leaves fell from the trees. The squirrels romped around the yard, digging little holes for their treasured nuts. The birds flew south in large flocks. The calendar edged toward the end of the year. The holiday decorations went up all over town. Yep, all the signs were in place. Winter is coming. And these folks will be ready. Plenty of food in the pantry, extra blankets on the beds, warm clothes pulled out of storage, emergency kits in the car, never letting the gas tank go below half. These folks are aware of the signs all around them, and they live their lives in a continual state of preparedness.

And this is the message of Advent. Preparedness. Being alert and ready. Not being taken by surprise when Christ arrives, not overreacting to the message, nor being cynical about the message that he is coming. Advent reminds us how we are to live our lives as Christians who are prepared for God's

arrival into our midst. Not being anxious, not being skeptical, but living in a state of constant readiness.

The word advent means “coming” or “arrival.” The season actually has dual expectations. Not only are we to prepare ourselves for the incarnation, the arrival of Christ as an infant, but we also are to prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ at the end of time, what is known as the Second Coming of Christ. There is an air of expectancy, of waiting tinged with excitement. Our biblical texts this morning and throughout the season of Advent follow this dual purpose of preparing us for both the coming of the Christ child and the coming of God’s final realm at the end of time.

The Old Testament lesson from the book of Jeremiah echoed the longing of the Jewish people. It recalled the words of God’s promise in the middle great turmoil and suffering. The kingdoms of Israel and Judah were divided. The northern kingdom of Israel had already fallen to the Assyrians, and the southern kingdom of Judah was about to fall to the Babylonians. Jeremiah the prophet came as a word of hope to the Jewish people, as they longed for the day when God’s promises would be fulfilled.

The passage opens with these words, “the days are surely coming.” There is a note of hope in that phrase, an expression of longing. Things are pretty bad right now, but the days are surely coming when that’s all going to change. God speaks to the people through the prophet Jeremiah and reaffirms what God will do in the future. The days are surely coming when the promise of restoration and salvation will become reality. Justice and peace will come to both Judah and Israel – old enmities will be cast aside.

And how will this come about? God points to the line of David, the great king of Israel’s history, as the source of this salvific event. A branch will spring out of the family tree of David, and through this branch, God will fulfill the ancient promises. To a world longing for redemption and hope, God will send a savior.

It is easy for us to see this passage from Jeremiah as a prophecy of the birth of Jesus. We claim this text as foretelling of the one who came into this world over 2000 years ago. He who came to set the captives free, give sight to the blind, feed the hungry, and bring justice to the poor. This is the Christ whom we worship and serve. He is the branch from line of David. And it is through him that God has fulfilled God’s promises.

And yet, though God’s kingdom has broken through into our dark world, it has not yet been fully realized. That much is certain. Nations still war with one another. People still suffer the ravages of violence and live in terror. Children die of starvation and disease. Terrorists blow up buildings. People all over the world live in situations of upheaval and strife, and those who still cling to hope can cry out, “the days are surely coming.”

The days are surely coming when God will bring peace and justice and restoration to the earth. In hope, we long for the day when God's kingdom will overtake the darkness that still covers much of our world - when God's realm will break through the dark veil and bring light to everything there is.

Jesus speaks of this coming kingdom in our passage from Luke's Gospel. This discourse takes place shortly after the scene of the Widow's Offering at the temple and then Jesus' prediction of the temple's destruction. The words that Jesus uses here are fiery, and portray a vivid and frightening image. He paints a picture of nature gone wild – disruptions in the heavens and of the seas. Just prior to this specific passage he talks about upheaval and wars. He uses words like desolation, great distress, vengeance and wrath. Words to cause more than a little anxiety to those who heard them.

The Bible contains a few examples of apocalyptic literature. In fact, we just had a passage from Mark a couple weeks ago with a similar theme. Images of the end of times, or the apocalypse. This style of writing is unfamiliar to most of us.

The Jewish people were familiar with these types of images of the end of times. A passage from Joel chapter 2 talks about "portents in the heavens and on the earth." (2:30) Isaiah describes the earth as being "utterly broken...torn asunder...(and) violently shaken." (24:19) A passage from Psalm 46 reads, "the nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts." (46:6) Psalm 89 gives an image of God ruling the "raging of the sea." (89:9) The passage here from Luke's gospel seems almost a conglomeration of them all. One scholar described it as "a veritable patchwork quilt of phrases from the Old Testament." (Beverly Gaventa, p. 8)

Apocalyptic language tends to be impressive and grand. It uses larger than life imagery to describe divine intervention into the world. It functions as showing how something extremely important, some huge event, enters into the mundane. To highlight its importance, it uses drastic and powerful images. The entrance of God's reign into the world definitely qualifies as a major event. And indeed it will be powerful.

The passage from Luke says that these mighty events in nature and the upheavals of the world, will be signs of the return of Christ. Jesus shares with them a parable of a fig tree which blooms in the spring. He says that when they see this happen, they know that summer is on the way. In the same way, when the signs of the end become apparent, they will know that the return of Christ is near and that the reign of God will finally arrive. The promises God gave to Israel and Judah so long ago will find their fulfillment. And we can say without fear, but with great hope, surely the days are coming.

Just as people react differently to the arrival of winter and the first snowfall, people react differently to the promise of Christ's return. Some will be caught unaware. They pay no attention to the signs, too busy caught up in their own little world. They will react with anxiety and panic.

There are others who see signs everywhere. Some of them try to predict when the end will come, even though Jesus said no one knows when it will occur. They spout gloom and doom to everyone, more focused on the end than what's happening here and now.

Then there are the scoffers. They think we're all insane, the predictions are bogus, and won't believe it unless they see Jesus coming with their own two eyes.

Then there are those who calmly accept the message and live lives of preparedness. This is the attitude Jesus is promoting in Luke's Gospel. Be watchful, be alert, be wary of falsehood and be vigilant. When Jesus came into this world as a tiny baby, he brought God's kingdom with him. We get glimpses of the kingdom all around us, and for that we are called to remain prepared. Distractions, however, are all around us. Things that threaten our readiness. Jesus warns us of these distractions. He mentions debauchery and drunkenness. Sin certainly keeps us from paying attention. But he also mentions being distracted by the worries of this life. These are what threaten to hinder our preparedness.

Everyday worries can interfere with our readiness. Focusing so much on providing for home and family. Getting caught up in the stresses and problems of everyday life. We worry about what the future might bring. Or we focus too much on specific political or world issues, but miss the big picture. Or sometimes we even fall prey to the American dream of wanting success, power and status. Some of these seem to be worthy distractions, others are more trivial. But when we focus too much attention on any of them, they distract us from seeing the work of God's kingdom around us.

We are living in the prep time. We have no idea of when Christ's Second Advent will come. But Christ bids us to remain alert. Though we live in a tumultuous world, we long for God's peace and restoration. We should live with an attitude of hope. We should live expecting that God will fulfill the promise to bring justice and salvation to our world. We must remain alert, because we believe that the days are surely coming. And in the meantime, while we live in hopeful expectancy, we can both witness and participate in God's kingdom breaking in all around us.