

BEYOND FEAR

First Sunday in Advent

December 2, 2012

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Texts: Jeremiah 33.14-16;
 Psalm 25.1-10;
 1 Thessalonians 3.9-13;
 Luke 21.25-36

Christmas is in the air! Hearing Christmas Carols. Thinking about and finding gifts for people. Decorating Christmas trees and sitting in the dark with candles burning. I particularly love being around children who are filled with anticipation.

For years I've been aware of how jarring the texts of Advent feel when heard in the context of a world already celebrating Christmas. As Jackie Knoll wrote in the description of the tangle she created for this Sunday's bulletin cover: "Beyond Fear? Luke for me at first reading was downright scary." The texts of these weeks that lead up to Christmas do at times touch on dark and foreboding themes. Even the title itself *Beyond Fear* suggests that we will be visiting again those shadow sides of human life. Haven't we been there enough? After all we read Job this summer! Isn't it time to step into the light?

That is where we are heading. The arch of this season leads us into Epiphany and the season of light. On our way we spend four weeks here in Advent acknowledging that the light we long for is not yet fully here. In that sense there are some connections between the anticipation of Christmas that is in the air all around us and the kind of waiting and watching that Advent calls us to.

As we read this first Sunday of Advent text from Jeremiah, we see Jeremiah waiting for the advent (the arrival) of a savior – waiting for God to fulfill the promise to restore their freedom. If you talk with a small child who is in the throes of anticipation, it is the promise of all that Christmas brings that they are waiting for. Yes, for many children the longing in their hearts

does not go much deeper than hoping Santa remembers to bring their favorite toy. I shouldn't say just children. All of us get caught up in the consumerism of the season. It is not so much *what* the world around is hoping for this time of year that draws me to make some connections with this season of Advent. It is the stance of anticipation that feels like the right attitude of heart for those of us observing this season of waiting.

For Jeremiah - a prophet during the destruction and captivity of Jerusalem's finest citizens - the promise of God to rebuild their city and the promise to raise up a leader once again brought with it an aching anticipation and a hope in the face of such despair. Talk to people in Gaza and Israel and you'll hear very similar hopes and dreams. They long for the very same freedom and security of Jeremiah's people. Talk to people on the East Coast, they look around them at the rubble that still remains hoping for someone to come and help them rebuild. Talk to the person whose family is embroiled in battle, factions who aren't speaking to each other, accusations thrown with every new email that comes across their screen. They long for the peace that Jeremiah envisions. We are a people who live on such Advent promises. Those promises are the foundation of our hope when the fear that Luke speaks about starts getting a little too close for comfort.

Every year in Advent, we hear these texts from the gospel when Jesus starts talking about the end of time and the coming of the Son of Man. These are perhaps the most jarring texts of Advent. Not exactly the texts that set the mood for candle lit rooms with soft Christmas Carols in the background. But they are texts that speak directly into Gaza, into the ruined Eastern seaboard, and into families that are crumbling. Not the part of Luke that warns us that the world is falling apart. I honestly don't think we need Luke to tell us that! We come by our fear quite independently of such alarming texts. If you don't already wake up with some sense of how dangerous and fragile life can be then just turn on the news or scan the headlines and you will get in touch with that reality within seconds.

There is a reason why every encounter between the divine and the human realms in scripture begins with the words "Do not fear." We are prone toward anxiety. We are hard wired for fear. And in many ways those

inclinations serve us. Show me a child without any fear and I will show you child who is prone to get hurt. The problem comes when we cannot move beyond fear – when we get so mired in the anxiety of life that we cannot see past the fear of the moment to be able to envision a future where help has come and we can live in peace. James F. Kay once wrote in the *Christian Century*: “The message of Advent is that when heaven itself is spinning into oblivion, when every fixed star on the moral compass is wavering, when all hell is breaking loose on earth, "your redemption is drawing near.”¹

That is what gives the people in exile hope: the capacity to look for the days that are surely coming when God will fulfill the promises made. As Christians who hear this text weeks before Christmas we can't help but hear the promise of Messiah and connect the promise of this text to the birth of Christ. And certainly we should but it does not end there. We are still looking for the fulfillment of this promise for justice and righteousness to rule the day- not a single day but all our days. Christ has come and yet we are still waiting because Christ is still coming. Every day Christ is coming and we are watching always for the coming of Christ among us.

And according to Luke, the fulfillment of God's promise comes as the people of God learn how to stand up even in the midst of turmoil and raise our heads and look beyond our fear for the coming of God's redemption. We sometimes speak of Advent as a time of preparation to celebrate the *birth* of Christ but that isn't what we need to prepare for. We need to prepare for this work of looking for God's presence in the middle of holy chaos. We need to prepare for the capacity to trust God's promises life is falling apart at the seams. As one author I read this week put it: our work is not to celebrate a birth but to learn how “we incarnate the same divinity Jesus manifested.”²

¹ James F. Kay, *The Christian Century*, 1997.

² Andrea La Sonde Anastos, *Awaken: The Art of Imaginative Preaching*, ACE, 2012-2013 Year C (Inver Grove Heights, Minnesota: Logo Productions, 2012), 3.

That is what we pray for each time we come to the table: that the Spirit of God who was incarnate in Jesus Christ will meet us and feed us in this sacred meal.

We pray for this so that when the waves of fear may come, we will not faint but will stand up and raise our heads and look for the coming of Christ among us.

It's an imaginative task that we do together as the people of God. That is why the provisions for the journey of advent from adult education include poetry, story, song, and art. We need help in cultivating our sense of anticipation: watching, waiting, longing and all with a sense of full expectation!

For “the days *are surely* coming when God *will* fulfill the promise made!”

On this first Sunday of Advent, this is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God!