

Be On Guard

A sermon preached by
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Texts:
Jeremiah 33:14-16
Luke 21: 25-36

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Jeremiah 33:14-16

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.

15 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. **16** In 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

[Jesus said] "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. **26** People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. **27** Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. **28** Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

29 Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; **30** as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. **31** So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. **32** Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. **33** Heaven 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 does not catch you unexpectedly, **35** like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. **36** Be 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."



"Behold the days are coming!" These are the words of God spoken through the prophet Jeremiah. "Behold, the *days* are coming!"

But what is it that is coming? *Days* are coming, sure, but what is that all about? We know *days* are coming. We don't need a prophet to tell us that, do we? Just a few days ago we were looking forward to the coming of Thanksgiving Day. That came and went. And now we look forward to the coming of Christmas Day – but that's going to come and go in the same way as it does every year. And then we look forward to New Year's Day – and that comes and goes each year as well. And eventually we end up right back at the same place we started – waiting for the coming days of Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's Day – one vicious cycle – day in, day out; year in, year out.

Sometimes it seems as if we spin our wheels, beat our heads against the wall for nothing. We try to get things together and get organized but we never seem to succeed – and whenever we begin to feel successful, there is always something else to do, something else to look forward to. It happens at home, at work, at church. What's the point? We try to ease our minds, settle down for a few hours, but then we lay awake thinking about the undone things, the almost done things, the things that might never get done. Sometimes it seems like we should just throw up our hands and say, "What's the use?"

Yet here we have people like Jeremiah telling us, "The days are coming!"

Did you ever see one of those guys on the street with a sign, "The end is near!?" It seems like a caricature of the doomsday preacher, something you'd see in a Sunday morning comic strip. But there are those people out there even today.

Before the American Civil War, a preacher by the name of William Miller predicted that Jesus would return about 1843 or 1844 – eventually he settled on the very specific date of October 22, 1844 for the second coming of the Christ. Well, Jesus didn't return on October 22 – at least as far as we know – and Miller changed the predicted date several times before he finally faded from view and his followers – the Millerites – eventually became the Seventh Day Adventists who continue to center their belief system on the inevitable second coming of Christ.

Apocalypticism has existed for nearly all of human history – and most definitely since the beginning of the church's life. And it exists even into today from Hal Lindsey's 1970 book *The Late Great Planet Earth* to David Koresh and the Branch Davidians in the early 1990's and their fiery death in Waco, Texas in 1993. From the Heaven's Gate mass suicide in 1997 to the Y2K end of the millennium scares and doomsday preachers. And it has even made its way into books that remind us of our fixation with the end – books like the *Left Behind* series of novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. Oh, and let's not forget that according to the Mayans and Nostradamus and Hollywood we only have a couple of years left – 2012 it all comes to an end, right?

The doomsayers have always been around, always ready to point a finger at the rest of the world. Crime, war, pollution, threat of nuclear destruction, earthquakes, floods, global warming. Pessimistic people using negativity to predict the unknowable feed our desire to know when the end will come, they feed our obsession with end-of-the-world scenarios. Surely the end of the world is upon us, say these preachers and proclaimers.

But is it? Is the end of the world right around the corner?

Luke described what he thought Jesus was talking about for the end of the world and the return of the Messiah for a second time. Luke has Jesus talking about cosmic disaster: "There will be signs in the sun and moon and stars." The world will be distressed at what is happening, there will be fear and foreboding – the

powers of the heavens will be shaken. "And they shall see the Son of Man [The Human Being] coming in a cloud with power and great glory."

"Be on guard," Luke has Jesus tell us. Be on guard for what is coming – be on guard so that you are not weighed down by the weightiness of this world's distractions. Be on guard.

It's the Jeremiah message all over again, isn't it? "Behold the days are coming!," says God through Jeremiah. "Be on guard," says Jesus through Luke.

But you and I look and look and look. And do we see anything coming? I'm not sure what we see ahead of us – but I don't think we see the end of the world coming anytime soon. Anyway, can we ever know when the end of the world will come and Christ will return? No, Jesus reminds us, we can't know. We simply need to be alert, be prepared, be ready, be on guard for whatever and whenever it will happen.

But the "be on guard" message of Luke's Jesus is less about the doomsday message and more about a message of hope. We lit the first candle of the Advent wreath today – it is the candle of hope because that is the underlying message of the Advent season. Hope is what sustains us through each sleepless night, through every moment of anticipation and anxiety, and even through each promising new day. Hope is what reminds us that there is more to come in the days that follow. Hope is what lifts us and moves us toward God's reign which was brought in with Jesus, which continues with us today in the Spirit's presence, and yet which will also come to us in the future.

Jennee Woodard tells the story of her 10 year old son, Phil, who has autism which creates for him a number of disabilities, most of which Jennee sees as barriers to his surviving in society as an adult. She and her family feel anxiety about Phil's future and they wrestle with how to make it all work for him. Phil was never able to tolerate any of the holiday changes by way of decorations

or music or general excitement. Changes in their church for the Advent season caused sensory overload for Phil.

Even Christmas present opening at home was intolerable: Phil would scream and cry as each package was moved and unwrapped. As frightened as he was when each new thing appeared, he was equally frightened when it changed or disappeared. We'd try to find him a present he'd enjoy, but he'd merely scream and cry in panic at the intrusion on his carefully ordered world, and the gifts would sit ignored until he outgrew them and we gave them to some little boy who could appreciate them. He wanted nothing. He would look straight at toys we thought he would like, and he would not react at all. He asked for nothing. He anticipated nothing. He just screamed and cried at all of it. It is no bliss to have a child who doesn't get it - who doesn't want anything and doesn't want to have anything to do with Christmas commercialism - or it is only bliss in some romantic fantasy. In real life it is a surreal nightmare.

But one Advent a few years ago was different. As they talked about what each child had on their Christmas lists, for the first time ever Phil answered. He wanted a PlayStation 2. They went to the store and picked it out, they wrapped it together, and Phil solemnly placed it under the tree with the announcement, "Open on December 25." As they got closer to Christmas, Jennee wrote:

Last night we'd returned from yet another Christmas rehearsal with our daughter, Phil found a Best Buy ad in the paper and turned immediately to the PlayStation games. He circled "Harry Potter" and "John Madden Football", handed the ad to Bob, and said, "I want Christmas." There were tears in my eyes. It's such a small thing, but such a truly amazing thing. *It's one more bit of*

hope that he will be able to function in some semblance of society as an adult one day - that he might be able to live just a BIT more independently, and one day want the things he needs to survive enough to work for them. (Not a foregone conclusion with autistic folks, which makes them particularly unemployable, no matter their intelligence.) Consumerism might be "the enemy", but a kid who understands none of it is only a hero in a *Chicken Soup for the Soul* story.

It's all about hope. That's what the waiting is about. That's what the preparation is about. It's about hope for the next days in our ongoing individual lives, hope for our corporate life as a community of faith, hope for our life as humans living in an interdependent world. It's about hope.

The events of which Luke has Jesus speak sound fearful but the truth of it is, the focus of the passage is hope and preparation. The disciples were encouraged to remain hopeful because the chaos was just a signal that the reign of God was near (verse 31) – and that's a good thing, a positive thing. They were not, however, free to be careless or carefree. The coming dangers would be real. The followers – and we – need to remain alert and to pray in order to endure whatever the coming trials might be.

The early Christians for whom Luke was writing his Gospel were not concerned with the question of *when* will the Messiah return. People down through history have spent way too much time, effort, and energy trying to pinpoint the exact moment when God will break back in to human history. Many have spent lifetimes trying to figure it out – but those efforts completely miss the point. It's not what followers of Jesus are supposed to be doing.

What was far more significant and far more urgent for the earliest Christians was the word *now*. It is far better for us to understand the end times in terms of what goes on in the everyday-

ness of our lives. “Be on guard,” says Jesus, “so that your hearts are not weighed down” – be on guard *now*, so that you are not worried *now*, so that the day does not catch you unexpectedly *now*. Some far-off, divine, cosmic event should not be of concern to us. What should be of concern is the here and now and how we live and serve in the now.

So often we decide that the doomsday preachers – the predictors – are so wrong, so far off-base that we should just ignore them because it doesn’t really matter. But it’s not really for you or I to deny what might happen – it’s not for you or I to decide that *these* things are the *last* things.

We experience disastrous moments each and every day of our lives, moments that span the spectrum of impact on us. From a loss of a Little League baseball game which can seem like the end of the world to a small child to the loss through death of a partner with whom one has shared a lifetime of memories. From something as small as disappointment that a friend didn’t show up at your party to the senseless loss of life in a senseless war. What are the last things that will usher in God’s reign as the Messiah returns? What are the last things? We cannot know. We *need* not know.

What we can know, though – and this is the point of Luke’s message – is that when it seems like we are at the end of our rope because of a specific yet minor setback or a globally significant tragedy, when it seems like all is lost there is still something to hold on to. Hope. When Job felt like all was lost and his life was a disaster, he looked to the heavens and got no answer. “When nothing is left,” says Job, “what then?”

“When nothing is left,” says Jesus, “God is left.”

In *East Coker*, the second of his poems in *Four Quartets*, T.S. Eliot wrote what is the guiding theme of Advent for me this year – this piece of that poem is on the cover of our Advent brochure:

I said to my soul
Be still
And wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing
And wait
without love
For love
would be love
of the
wrong thing
There is yet faith
But the faith and the hope and the love
Are all in the waiting
And do not think
For you are not ready for thought
So the darkness shall be the light
And the stillness
The dancing

“The faith and the hope and the love / Are all in the waiting.”
As a young man TS Eliot suffered a religious crisis and a nervous breakdown before regaining his emotional equilibrium and his faith. His early poetry deals with spiritually exhausted people who exist in the impersonal modern world. A sense of hope and love in the waiting sustained him and led him back to where he could believe again.

Jesus reminds us and Luke writes for us: “When these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” Hope – promise. Maybe that’s what TS Eliot was experiencing – an inability to stand and raise his head – a lack of the strength needed to go on into the unknown of the days to come. I know there are times when I need to be redirected and reminded that there is, indeed, hope in the waiting. And I suspect for any of us, for each of us, there are times of doubt and confusion and misdirection in our faith journeys. I suspect there are times when we need to hear Luke’s message again – “Hey, all

you followers, stand up and lift your heads when all seems lost – redemption is coming in the return of the Messiah.”

The message of this piece of Luke’s Gospel is perfect for the beginning of our worship during Advent. First, he writes, something is coming. Second, when nothing is left, God is left. Third, as followers of Jesus and with the hope that accompanies that role we can have the strength to survive.

This Advent, and every Advent, we look for the coming of Christ. We don’t need to look for the birth of Jesus again because we know that happened only once some 2,000 years ago. Instead, we celebrate that ancient birth and look forward to the return again of that very same Messiah.

“For Christians, [theologian Jurgen Moltmann argues] Christ’s (first) coming only makes sense in light of his promise to come again. The two cannot be separated without damage being done to both: without a first coming there could be no second coming; without the second coming, it becomes difficult to believe that current existence is somehow the kingdom of God. By holding both together, however, Advent not only points backward to the first coming, but also forward to the second, thus providing Christians with a vision of the future and toward the future. Advent, then, is a time of expectation: it is the acknowledgment of the fact that, although God has acted decisively on our behalf in Jesus’ birth, there is still much outstanding.” (*Advent: A Season of Expectation and Anticipation*. Robert T. Cornelison, Assistant Professor of Theology at Fordham University in New York City, in *The Living Pulpit*, Inc.)

The days are coming! – a clear message for each Advent. Its not the days of Christmas shopping that are coming. It’s not Christmas Day that is coming. It is the days of the return of Christ that are coming.

The days may be upon us – we cannot know when or what that means – but we can find strength in the hope of God’s everlasting presence among us and in knowing that we as faithful followers have the ability to endure. For TS Eliot that means that in the darkness which often seems to be all around us we can indeed experience the light – within the stillness of our faith-paralysis, we can still dance in the presence of God.

Be on guard. The days are coming. Let hope lead you through the days and weeks and years to come – through the darkness and the stillness. And never be afraid.

Amen.