“Life is still here”

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Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36

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***Jeremiah 33:14-16***

***14The 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. 15In 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. 16In 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***

***25“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. 26People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. 27Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. 28Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”***

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

Welcome to the first Sunday of Advent, also the first Sunday of the Church year. Each year we enter into this time of waiting for the light of Christ to come into the darkness of the world, using a different gospel narrative. While each gospel shares a good deal of information, each gospel still has its own perspective and stories unique to each gospel. This year we will focus on the gospel of Luke. This gospel portrays Jesus as extremely compassionate, and includes many more interactions between Jesus and every day people.

The first thing you might notice is that Advent uses an unusual timeline. I can’t remember the source, but there is this idea that one of the commentators reminded me of, that Advent collapses time for us and asks us to live in the future, the past and the present at the same time. “Advent tries to hold together the feelings of Christ coming in majesty, history, and mystery.”

For example, the season of Advent was not originally used as a celebratory time of preparation of Jesus’ birth. It was originally a time to prepare for Jesus’ second coming. In the first three weeks of Advent, scripture consists of apocalyptic warnings. First these words of Jeremiah and Jesus. Next week the words of John the Baptist warn the people to be baptized or else. And even the third week when we read about Mary singing joyfully, her words are about the world as it is being turned upside down. That might explain the tone of the texts for Advent. This reminds us of the majesty of God coming into our world and the excitement and terror that that thought entails. These apocalyptic warnings are the good news to those who live in such a way that longs for the release and deliverance from suffering that the current world does not offer them. For those for whom life is sucked dry from poverty, from illness, from lack of access, from being invisible, from despair, from being a tool in a system not meant for themselves, an upside down world would be a welcome thing. For those who are suffering, how lovely to hear “the days are coming…” or “in those days….” To live in a world without that suffering would truly be majestic.

Then there’s the history. Both of these texts today remind us that Biblical words are much older than the season of Advent. Both Jeremiah and the gospel of Luke are writings taken from history, about events and teachings that were happening at the time.

Then there is the mystery. The mystery is that these ancient texts are not just words from the past or words to inspire majestic scenes. What a mystery is it that these texts have come to have such meaning for every generation that has read them and lived them. What a mystery is it that these texts come alive every time we read them and begin to notice the world and the possibilities that they point to. Every scripture text during Advent will mix together this majesty, history and mystery in some new way.

“Advent reminds us that these scripture texts are not just a sentimental story, and they’re not just about someday, but are also now.”

Luke 21 is a very long discourse centered on things to come. Jesus talked about persecutions, witnesses, and the destruction of Jerusalem. Our text this morning finishes that discourse with talk of the coming of the Son of Man, and followed by an appeal to remain ready. You can hear the continuation of the warnings about what signs to look for before the Son of Man comes. But there’s also something else.

*25 “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.”*

The something else is the call for confidence. “Stand up and raise your heads.” Now that’s not what I want to do when I have seen signs in the sun, the moon and the stars, and distress among the nations and roaring seas and waves. I will be one of the ones fainting from fear. When you’re in the trenches, its dangerous to stand up and raise your head!

But that’s what Luke’s gospel text reminds us to do. We will see these signs, and we will know that redemption is near. There will be deliverance and release. The power in a world that benefits from keeping people in their place will not work anymore.

We will recognize the time that Luke is talking about in the same way those who care for trees know what the early buds mean. We are used to seeing signs of things but we haven’t always been attentive to them.

If I talk about the day the sky turned orange, do you remember what I’m referring to? The fires in the north were so bad that the smoke blocked the sun enough that only the color orange was able to get through the smoke. People were using dark humor release and talking about the end times then. When the pandemic started and we were being asked to stay home and it turned into much longer than anyone expected or wanted, people talked about the end days then too. I’ll bet we can each think of other times when we had that feeling in some way. One of those times for me was when I saw the twin towers fall to the ground on the television news. I felt as if I was living in a time I couldn’t understand. I wondered then if I was experiencing a repeat of the past, and like it was in places that have had massive war destruction? Or was I experiencing the beginning of a new future where destruction from a war was coming to US soil? Or maybe it was after the first few times there were school shootings, and we said to ourselves, this isn’t normal! I can imagine that every time something terrible has happened in history, people thought it was a sign of the world’s undoing. When we see something startling or terrifying once, that’s one thing. But when we are attentive to the continuation of these startling things or terrifying things, how can we not worry about where the future is taking us. Will the planet survive? Are we in the middle of a new history book being written, as we notice the change of political situations in not just our own country, but others? What alliances are being formed around the world? Are these signs of something?

Where does one find the hope and the light bright enough to dim that darkness? The Christ we meet in the gospel of Luke, full of compassion, always present where someone is lost, is always saving us. The Christ from this gospel writer is the one who is always there when circumstances lead one’s life astray. The incarnation of God is a salvific event. While we are being attentive to signs, we can’t lose sight of where Jesus is. We need to notice those signs also. We have confidence to stand up and raise our heads to see the signs like the fig tree. The signs showing that life is still ahead.

What will we be attentive to this season? What new habits of attentiveness might we begin this season? As we await the promise of Christ on Christmas Eve, we simultaneously remember that Christ has been born and we live with his promises every day. This is the mystery of the past and the present and the future. We await for the coming. We live with the reminders. We hope for the future.

Let us pray,