

“The Days Are Surely Coming”

Valley Presbyterian Church – November 29, 2009

First Sunday of Advent

Psalm 25:1-10

Rev. John Wahl

Jeremiah 33:10-16

The history of the United States is sometimes divided into halves according to its most important events: there are the pre- and post-Revolutionary periods; the time before and after the Civil War; the days prior to and after the development of nuclear weapons; and – more recently – the days pre- and post-9-11. These monumental events in history allude to important differences in the psyche of the American people; fluctuations between safety and peril; hope and despair.

In a similar way, the history of the people of God is divided by a few significant historical markers. Among them are the Exodus from Egypt; settlement in the Promised Land; the united monarchy and the Babylonian exile. This final event was a time of great upheaval and dislocation, as many if not most of the Israelites were forcibly removed from their homeland – leaving the city of Jerusalem desolate and defeated. It was in and around this period of exile that many of the great prophets of the Old Testament brought the word of God to a people that were filled with despair. The prophets spoke messages of judgment upon a people who had broken their covenant with God – having failed to remain faithful and choosing instead to consort with idols and ignore the needs of the poor, the widows and the orphans.

In the midst of this period of despair, the prophet arises, with an imagination and a deep sense of call to proclaim even then, even in desolation, destruction, and loss, the promise of God's future taking shape beneath and behind it all. Not only will an empty city become filled again, but the empty hearts of the people will also be filled. Their hopes will be restored because righteousness will return to their midst in the form of a new leader.

Jeremiah proclaims God's message that “the days are surely coming when I will fulfill the promise.” That long-standing promise is for a righteous branch to emerge to restore the fortunes of these broken and exiled people. Jeremiah doesn't say that things might get better, or could be better, or that we should be optimistic about the future possibilities. He says that the days are *surely* coming, certainly

coming – and you can count on God's promises, which are rooted in justice and righteousness.¹

Advent is a time of waiting; a time which is pregnant with hope for the One who is to come. So often, we think of this time as the Christmas season, and the secular world reinforces that premature celebration, if only to entice us to make the kind of preparations that require early spending. Meanwhile, the church waits, in the midst of the dark night, with only a few candles of expectation lit, for the actual breaking forth of God's light, the fulfillment of God's promises, and the return of the One who came to teach us justice by embodying compassion and healing and righteousness.

As we journey into this season of Advent, we are called not to a time of passive waiting, but to examine the world around us and to recognize how we – like the Israelites of old – are in need of a savior. Although our city has become a global village, we can even see the signs of desolation close to home. The situations of our neighborhood and our world often cause us to recoil with uncertainty.

We lean toward an expected future with Jesus and, because of that expectancy, we order our lives differently. In ancient days, a righteous branch would have described a legitimate heir – one that both springs forth from an expected source and fulfills all the expectations placed upon him. Therefore, for the people of Israel, a righteous leader would have come from the line of David and governed in the manner of David.

The restoration of fortunes which will come through the arrival of the righteous branch is not simply a matter of abundance. There will not just be more of everything available to them; or less for their enemies. It also would include the reestablishment of systems of governance and religion, creating leaders who will rightly render the affairs of the people and will lead them in their worship of the Lord.

Renewal takes place in economic and social ways. Business transactions will resume. Real estate deals will be possible. People will engage in cultic rituals. And so, the future vision of God's blessing is not simply spiritual and personal. It is also richly material, life-enhancing, socially sustaining and enjoyable. The God who saves is also the God who blesses. Politics and religion, the governance of the city and the service of God in worship, are part of the restoration that God effects.²

¹ Kate Huey, "Sign of Things to Come"

² *New Interpreters Bible Commentary*, vol. 6

The false prophets who spread their false message before, during and after the days of Jeremiah had claimed that nothing of substance would happen to the people of Israel because of their deeds and misdeeds. They wrongly assumed that there would be no calling to account for a people who refused to live by the instruction of the Lord. An ebb and flow of fortunes might occur, but it would be based on human circumstance, and not on the movement of God's will.

The news that the prophet Jeremiah proclaims is good, the promise is hopeful, and yet there is judgment, too. If there were not some element of judgment, then why would anything that we do matter? The rightness and wrongness, the good and the evil content of our lives and our choices give them moral weight, and cause them to matter even more. Our accumulated choices, great and small, are what shape our communities either into centers of greed and self-interest, or radiant centers of hope and love and peace.

Advent has been designated as the season for waiting, but it is also the season for longing. As the first, lone candle of the Advent wreath burns, Jeremiah recalls his own city burning, and yet he speaks not of destruction, but of God's future as he offers his cry of longing.³

Advent is known in the church as the season of *maranatha*, which means "come, Lord Jesus." Our fundamental longing is for the arrival of Christ; the long-expected fulfillment of the promised messiah. We long for a day that is surely coming because we know that our celebration of the birth is now less than four weeks away. And yet, there is more substance and detail to our longings – for ourselves, for our families, for our church and for our world.

Maybe you long for a day when leaders in our midst truly are righteous, and are so because they are held to account for their actions, not because they have lots of money for their campaigns or look good on TV. Maybe you long for a day when the poor in our city are not sent to shelters or forced to sleep in the streets. Maybe you long for the day when the minimum wage is a living wage; or when there are no more body bags coming home from Iraq; no more need to keep track of hate crimes; and no more reason to wage a war on harmful drugs.

I long for the day when we will truly take to heart the prophet's proclamation that "the days are surely coming." I long to participate in and with a church universal which has confidence that God's plan for the world is centered in both mercy and justice; a church that devotes its energies not to competition within, but works to bring about both material and spiritual improvements throughout the global village.

³ Gary Charles in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, vol. 1

I also long for churches in our community that would speak to people who feel that they are not worthy to be a part of God's vision. I long for those in our midst to know that God's promises are for them, because – in Christ – the covenant between God and God's people has been offered to everyone. I long for the message to be heard that *Emmanuel*, God with us, is a reality for all of creation. The One who was made flesh is not the fulfillment of a promise made to some, but will meet the longings of all.

If we stop during this Advent – but not yet Christmas – season, and look at our communities, would we see justice and righteousness? As we shop for gifts and write our cards and decorate our homes, how easy would it be to overlook the many people who awaken each day not in safety but in fear for their lives? In the fast-paced days that lead up to our personal and family and church-wide celebrations, are we missing the slow-motion violence of economic injustice that can inflict injury, pain, loneliness and hunger upon those who suffer the effects of systemic greed and negligence? Are the deepest longing of our hearts in line with the longings of the heart of God, which Jeremiah spoke to a waiting and longing generation so long ago?

“The days are surely coming, says the Lord” when God “will cause a righteous branch to spring up.” Righteousness is not an attitude. It refers to conduct. It means doing a good thing which is a God thing. Self-righteousness is an inflated ego which points everything inwardly; righteousness, on the other hand, is “the humble ethic of living toward others in just and loving relationships.”⁴

As waiting people, are we ready to welcome the day when God's vision of justice and righteousness will be fulfilled in our midst? Are we ready to accept this most central of all historical markers; the day when Christ comes among us – in fullness and truth? AMEN.

⁴ Deborah Block in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, vol. 1