

Readings for November 28, 2021

Jeremiah 33:14-16

¹⁴ “‘The days are coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when I will fulfill the good promise I made to the people of Israel and Judah.

¹⁵ “‘In those days and at that time I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David’s line; he will do what is just and right in the land. ¹⁶ In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which it will be called: The LORD Our Righteous Savior.’”

Luke 21:25-36

²⁵ “There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. ²⁶ People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. ²⁷ At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. ²⁸ When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

²⁹ He told them this parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees. ³⁰ When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. ³¹ Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³² “Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. ³³ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. ³⁴ “Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you suddenly like a trap. ³⁵ For it will come on all those who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶ Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.”

Sermon: Waiting in Faith and in Hope . . .

Advent is a time of *waiting*. It is a time of anticipation, a month-long journey that eventually explodes, as Luke's Gospel tells us, with light and song in the shocking birth of Jesus. The Christian church therefore celebrates Advent with weekly Bible readings that begins in darkness and ends in light. We have to be patient and not get ahead ourselves, however much the stores want to make us think Christmas is already here! Here at St. Andrew's, two Advent Sundays have in the past been taken up with an enjoyable Christmas pageant and a wonderful Cantata, leaving just two Sundays to absorb the significance and build-up of Advent. That being the case, allow me to explain again the Christian Advent tradition. The first Sunday explores Christ's *second* coming, not his first; then for two weeks we consider John the Baptist as one who prepares the way. Only then do we finally consider aspects of the birth of Jesus from the Gospels of either Matthew or Luke. The church also builds up the suspense with the weekly lighting of the Advent candles of hope, peace, joy, and love. And today's lonely candle is of *hope*.

On one level, our common extended experience of COVID could be described as "waiting in hope." And because of that, perhaps we are more familiar with this concept [of "waiting in hope"] than we would like to be. I would suggest this may be one significant difference from pre-COVID times. But what are we waiting for? Many would say that they're waiting for things to get *back* to "normal." But we need to be careful, because those families who have experienced a severe sickness, even death, are not *able* to put back the clock to a state called "normal." I think that by now, we all realise that can't be looking backwards to a *familiar* past, but forwards to an *uncertain* future and we need to learn to live with that ambiguity. And that being the case, waiting *in hope* makes better sense, because the word hope itself speaks of our aspirations *not* our certainties. Hope encourages to look forward with optimism, not pessimism. So, again, what are we waiting for? Or, put differently, what are the grounds of our optimism or what is the basis of our hope? For many those grounds are in vaccines and booster shots, yet we also know that a vocal minority don't place their hope in such medicines. Some have hope in various leaders, such as their employers or in government, not because they necessarily like them, but because they recognise that leaders are, on the whole, trying responsibly to create stability not chaos; after all, order is better than disorder, an ever-changing plan is better than no plan at all. I would add that cynicism and mistrust is the enemy of hope. Regardless of COVID, we all have life struggles, and, in such crises, we need to pause and remind ourselves of the grounds of *our* hope – for *perspective* matters.

2000 years ago, before the very first "Christmas," hope had all but vanished for the Jewish people. Let's briefly remind ourselves of that bleak time. The Romans ruled throughout their empire, and while there was relative peace in the Judea, that so-called "peace" was brutally enforced by Roman garrisons throughout the region. Jews had some freedom to practice their religion, but next door to the Temple was a cohort in a Fort Antonia to ensure nothing got out of hand.¹ Moreover, the Jews widely accepted that there had been no prophetic voice in the land for 200 years; their living memory was of God's

¹ Nationalistic fervor, such as that inspired by zealots, was violently suppressed.

silence. That being the case, what was the source of their hope? It was *their faith in God's promises*, like the one we heard earlier from the prophet Jeremiah. He and other voices spoke of a Messiah who would come and be known as "The LORD Our Righteous Savior."² That had been the Jewish hope for 600 years, and that's a long time for a single candle to burn! However much *our* patience may be wearing thin today, reflect on the duration of that long wait. But this also reminds us that while many Jews had lost faith in themselves and in their own abilities to alter the future, at least some of them still trusted in God's faithfulness. So my first point is, *are we* waiting in hope today? In whom or what is our hope? And regardless of our own experiences of the silence of God, do we – as people of faith - wait trusting in God's character – in his faithfulness? Or have we given up?

As I mentioned earlier, the first Sunday in Advent reminds us that we are, today, waiting in hope for the *second* coming of Jesus.³ In our gospel reading,⁴ Jesus and his followers were finally in Jerusalem, and the disciples understandably wanted to know about the future. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke all end Jesus' ministry with his predictions concerning coming events. Jesus warned them, yet again, that the Temple would be destroyed. And about 40 years later, in AD 70, the Temple and Jerusalem were both destroyed by the Romans.⁵ The Gospels of Luke and Matthew were both written a decade or so *after* that cataclysmic event, and their readers would all know of that history. Jesus also speaks to *his* audience in apocalyptic terms of signs in the sun, moon, and stars,⁶ yet without specifying what they are. Before anyone gets carried away with their imagination in terms of eclipses, comets, and the like, we must first and foremost realize Jesus is pointing to Old Testament oracles as one day being fulfilled.⁷ The same is true of his next comment, that "on the earth, nations will be in anguish and confusion at the roaring and tossing of the sea."⁸ In other words, order and the normal things we usually take for granted will be threatened by chaos. In today's language, we could be talking about an unstable economy and supply chains, high fuel prices, political instability, the threat of civil unrest and war, disease, severe weather, and climate change, etc. Scary as all that sounds, Jesus *wasn't* trying to induce fear but to remind them that such things would precede the "Son of Man coming with power and great glory," which again refers back to a prophetic vision of Daniel⁹ that points to the end of time. And that's

² Jer 33:16b. The connection with King David's lineage is also made clear.

³ As famed preacher Fleming Rutledge puts it, Advent is about the "once *and future* coming of Jesus Christ." See Rutledge, *Advent: The Once and Future Coming of Jesus Christ*, (Eerdmans, 2018).

⁴ Luke 21:25-36; see also Mark 13:24-37; Matt 24:29-44.

⁵ From now on, for Christians, the coming of the Son of Man in glory replaces the Temple as the locus of hope for the full realization of the kingdom of God.

⁶ Luke 21:25. (Whether it is Luke or Jesus actually "speaking," the point is the same!

⁷ See, for example: Isa 13:10; 24:19; 34:4; Ezek 32:7; Joel 2:30-31. (And those heavenly bodies might be referring to earthly superpowers.) This *poetic* imagery harks back to the Babylonian conquest, one of bleakest times in Jewish history. It is not meant to be taken literally, but to signify that all that is meant to be stable in society, namely, law, order, decency, food supply, etc., will disintegrate. Apocalyptic visions were also recycled and applied to new situations. That is because apocalyptic writers looked to understand God's mighty acts in the past as a framework for understanding how the people of God should respond to the present. The enemy is not any one empire; but *all* idolatrous political, economic, and military powers that are co-opted by evil and result in oppression and replace worship of the one true God.

⁸ See: Ps 46:2-3; Hag 2:6; Wis 5:22; Isa 24:19.

⁹ See Dan 7:13-14; Rev 1:7; Matt 24:30.

good news, because Jesus concludes that *when* such things happen, then our redemption is near; God's rescue of the faithful will soon be at hand. Jesus then says, "lift up your heads"¹⁰ - don't be downcast or discouraged! After all, Christ's return is ultimately what we are waiting in hope *for* in such dire and uncertain times. That is the Christian message of comfort for our times, if we choose to believe it. But the bottom line is this: just as the life of Jesus is to be seen as the fulfilment of various ancient oracles,¹¹ so there are yet *more* scriptures to be fulfilled. And like the Jews in Jesus' day, our hope is in the faithfulness of God.

Jesus then says two things, and the way Luke presents them is a bit confusing because we are unsure whether Jesus is referring to the destruction of the Temple¹² or his second coming as glorious King and Judge, or a mixture of the two. Nevertheless, two things are clear: first, Jesus says don't have your heads in the sand nor distracted by the cares of this world. Look instead at *the signs of the times* and interpret them properly, just as when you see new buds on the trees you know that spring is coming. And second, Jesus tells his followers to "Be always on the watch and pray that you may be able to escape all that's about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man"¹³ on that day.¹⁴ The ultimate destiny of authentic followers of Jesus is nothing to be feared. Even so, Luke is also encouraging *his readers* to stand firm in whatever the trials they may be presently experiencing. Again, that is waiting in hope for a promise to be fulfilled. That also applies to us today; do we believe in that promise – that Christ will return - and are we being faithful?

To summarize: it may seem strange to us - as we anticipate the birth of Jesus - to have readings about Christ's second coming. However, the Jews of the first century were eagerly expecting a Messiah but had no idea *when* he would arrive. Of course, we know that Jesus *did* come, and – as I mentioned last week¹⁵ - we believe him to be the Messiah, so we are in a similar state as those first century Jews as we anticipate with hope that the Messiah will come again. But we are in a better situation because we know who we are waiting for! Consequently, as we wait for the return of King Jesus, the Son of Man, not knowing that day or the hour of that second Advent, we can join in with those first century Jews, watching and waiting and keeping alert for the coming of Jesus that we celebrate at Christmas time.

There is yet another thing, the waiting is *not* to be passive, like waiting for a bus or for an Amazon delivery. Rather it's more like the fisherman who is waiting for the fish to bite the bait at the end of his rod. This kind of waiting is full of expectation *and hope*. The fisherman is in his favorite spot, and he knows that the fish will eventually bite. That is the kind of *active, hope-filled* waiting that Jesus had in mind when he tells his followers to be alert. Remember too that after Jesus spoke to his disciples about

¹⁰ Luke 21:28

¹¹ That is the message of all the Gospel – indeed New Testament - writers.

¹² For example, Luke 21:32 likely refers to the generation that witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem.

¹³ Luke 21:36.

¹⁴ Luke 21:34 mentions "that day."

¹⁵ See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Jesus-as-Messiah-and-Lord.pdf> .

the future, Luke tells us that Jesus used every day that he had left to teach in the temple. He was busy spreading the good news of the kingdom of God.¹⁶ That's not being passive. We do not know the time when Christ will return, but when that happens, in what state will he find us? Disciples are to be busy with the outward-looking mission of the church, not preoccupied with apocalyptic speculation or other distractions. As we wait in hope and in faith, let's be busy doing deeds that are characterized by the values of the kingdom of God, namely: mercy, forgiveness, healing, and peace – all of which Jesus demonstrated in the *first* Advent.

I conclude with the reassuring words of Jesus for these uncertain times: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." Even so, we say: "Come Lord Jesus, Come." Amen. Let us pray.

¹⁶ Luke 21:37-38.