

“Because God is Still in Charge” 2015

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

Over the Internet, some pastors and I have been discussing Advent, and one of the younger pastors commented that this whole Advent waiting thing doesn't make sense to him, and that as more and more time passes it's becoming less and less meaningful. Explaining further he added, "I've been waiting for a very long time, **I've been waiting my whole life ...and ...nothing so far.**"

That pastor, fresh out of seminary is maybe 25 years old or so, and it struck me that there is really nothing that he has been doing for a very long time, **and that it's way too soon to be making that sort of judgment.**

My work-boots and some of the clothes hanging in my closet have had considerably more time and life-experience than that young pastor has managed to accumulate so far **...and maybe he just hasn't been around long enough yet to appreciate the significance and meaning, purpose and value that we can receive with Advent waiting and preparation. Today we begin once again a journey that we've taken together before, our season of looking backward and forward to prepare and to wait.**

Advent is the season we celebrate the coming of Jesus Christ. We remember the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem and we are waiting and preparing for his promised return. **Like crossing a busy street, it's important that we look both ways.**

Later on during Advent, we will focus on the stories and events connected with his birth and what they mean to us today. But for this first week of Advent, our focus is on understanding the significance and hope of the Second Coming of Christ... **a topic that is easily and frequently misunderstood.**

For sometimes the emphasis on fear and dread of a brutal judgment, or on what you might be caught doing when Jesus returns in glory, but that approach to the Second Coming misses the point, **that God's purpose is life and salvation, not destruction. The Second Coming is about God bringing an end to sadness, sin, tears, despair and death as the hope and joy of God's grace and love are realized.**

**But how do we do Advent well this year so to receive its full benefit, and let the full blessing of Advent truly enrich our Christmas?**

\* Surely the greatest and most dangerous obstacles are the ways this world and our culture can distract us and work against our having a meaningful and beneficial Advent and Christmas.

Consider how easy the events and circumstances of life can derail our faith into despair or fearful worry as if God was not really powerful enough and in control, or was not wise and loving, and His promises sure.

Such as when we read news of war, violence and natural disasters, or hear the enflamed rhetoric of political campaigns, we may perceive things as spinning out of control, **and then stop looking and noticing where God is at work, and in hopelessness and defeat, assume this must be the end.**

**It can all leave us feeling overwhelmed, lost and discouraged with fear and doubt, wondering if God is anywhere in all this?**

Through the prophet Jeremiah we're given a different perspective. In Jeremiah's time, the situation in Judah was dire, literally, Jerusalem was under siege from the Babylonian army, and it was just a matter of time until the city was defeated and the starving people would be taken into captivity...but this passage is a message of hope!

Exile won't be the end of the story, God is still in charge, and had promised wonderful things, still yet to happen... so it's way too soon to be making any final judgements. vs. 14-16

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Judah ... 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. In those days Judah will be saved ...

The promise was not that God would prevent their defeat and exile, but that God would bring them through it, that they would return to their homes to rebuild, and the Messiah would come, vs. 15 and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.

The hope Jeremiah described was rooted in God's love and faithfulness, that never abandons his people.

**Beyond the ashes of devastation, God's promised future was certain in the truth and hope of God's ongoing purpose and activity in our world.**

And in the Luke passage, Jesus is speaking to his disciples from that same perspective of hope and promise. vs. 25-26

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. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

Jesus was warning and describing terrible times of distress. But his message is not to duck and hide, or to live in fear that the world is ending, vs. 28

Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.

Don't read tribulation as hopeless defeat or disaster, but as hope and assurance that redemption is drawing near, just as sprouting leaves mean that a plant is still alive. vs. 29-31

Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.

All through Scripture, a fig tree is often used as a symbol of blessings and hope, and disasters such as the Babylonian Exile were symbolized as cutting down the fig trees.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus refers to a fig tree three times, and each time it's about tending the fig tree and with patience, waiting for the figs to ripen. In this parable, Jesus is teaching, we also must be patient in waiting for God's promised ending.

The message of this parable is not a prediction as in a timetable, nor is it meant to serve as a map or blueprint for the future. It is a call for Christians to be alert and watching in hope and assurance through the difficult days ahead.

Continuing, Jesus explained to his listeners, vs. 32-33

Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

Within the lifetime of his original listeners, that generation, the Temple was completely torn down and destroyed, and a temple to the Roman god Jupiter build in its place. With all that death and destruction, maybe it looked like the end of the world – but it wasn't.

**\* God was up to something more, and His purpose was still in process.**

As it turned out, with the terrible and fearful destruction of Jerusalem the early church was driven out into the gentile world. The destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple that Jesus predicted forced the Christian church to relocate – to spread out and evangelize the rest of the world.

Jesus was warning that hard times were in fact coming, but don't misread them as defeat or disaster. Instead, rest in the assurance that redemption draws near **just as sprouting leaves mean the plant is alive and that in time, the final fruit will ripen.**

And against their normal reaction of fear, to panic and hide, don't be weighed down by fearful anxieties or amusements, but stand boldly and rise, for the Kingdom is coming.

vs. 28, 34

*Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near. ... Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life...*

One facet of Advent waiting is having hope amid struggle and strife, and that whatever else is going on in our lives or in the world still our God rules, and our God remains in control... **for the brokenness and evil of this world do not have the last word.**

We need to hear that truth and promise from God, especial today, because for many, Advent and Christmas are not all about joy, but can be a very hard reminder of loved ones that are gone, or of pleasures and wonderful memories, we now miss... but wherever there is pain and suffering, there we will also find our God bringing healing-grace and hope.

This Advent may our lives be renewed by the Power & Presence of Christ, by focusing on our God of hope rather than the stuff of this world and know that truly God does have something awesome and wonderful for us. The point of Luke's text is that there will be disasters, **but our hope and assurance is that God is always still in charge.**

Another danger-distraction to our Advent preparations and waiting can be getting caught up in the hectic and stress of the season... so many demands, so much we desire, and so much we feel we need to do.

**How foolishly destructive, if we** overload our calendars and our lives with endless holiday activity.

**How foolishly destructive, if we** compulsively overdo in elaborate preparations and expectations

**How foolishly destructive, if we** make Christmas something we accomplish, rather than God.

In the display window of a large department store a sign says:

"What is Christmas? Christmas is wide-eyed children; fairy-land magic; age-old music; and good will in the hearts of men, for 'tis the season to be jolly."

**That sounds like fun, ut even the Grinch knew better than that.**

To quote Dr. Suess,

"Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before, Maybe Christmas, he thought, doesn't come from a store Maybe Christmas... perhaps ... means a little bit more!"

Truth is, the greatest danger to our Christian faith doesn't comes from anti-Christian persecution or wacky court decisions but from cultural contamination, corruption and compromise... **that we allow to redefine or influence our Christmas celebration.**

So as we travel on this journey through culture toward Christmas, it's important to focus and remember that it has something to do with our hope in Jesus Christ.

A young naval officer was given opportunity to do an important task when he was to command the ship from port and out to sea. With great skill and efficiency he established a new record for getting the ship underway.

But then a sailor handed him a message from the captain: "My personal congratulations upon completing your underway preparation exercises according to the book and with amazing speed. In your haste however, you overlooked one of the fundamental rules, -- always make sure the captain is on board before you leave."

**Let's don't leave port without our captain on board!**

So in our holiday rush, preparations and busyness, in our striving toward accomplishing Christmas success, don't lose our focus or compromise our Advent and Christmas by failing to take time for spiritual preparations

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... for time in prayer, Advent readings and quiet reflection;  
... sharing love and compassion with those in need  
... nurturing the blessings of our relationships  
... by going out of our way to share the good news with others,  
... and speaking of hope in a world filled with fear and uncertainty.

Surely God does has something special and awesome for each of us **but we'll have wait in eager and faithful anticipation to receive the true blessings that the Lord out God intends.**

**Today, along with Christians from around the world, we light the first candle of our four-week journey of Advent... not hunkered down in fear, doubt, dread or terror, but standing together in faith, trusting in God's grace.**

As the psalmist writes, Psalm 37:7, 46:10

Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him... Be still, and know that I am God!