

## What About Tomorrow?

What about tomorrow? That seems to be a question we ask ourselves and each other most of our lives. When younger- “Is tomorrow my birthday?” “How many tomorrows until Christmas?” When we grow into the teenage years and on into adulthood- thinking in the short term when dealing with busy schedules, we ask, “What about tomorrow? I could meet then.” Thinking long term- these past months that have stretched into years, the question, “What About Tomorrow?” has us asking what the future “tomorrows” may bring. We dream of “normal” while knowing the reality that only a “new normal” will likely be true. Then especially as we get older, we are encouraged to think in terms of preparing our earthly family for our future “tomorrows.”

What does the future hold- whether near term or long term? How do we view the future tomorrows? As we stand here on the First Sunday of Advent for this year of 2021, it seems an appropriate time to consider the future. Giving us a focus, our scriptures this morning from the Prophet Jeremiah, and the Gospel of Luke address this issue. Both come with good news IF we can move beyond the “reality” language they use and take their words seriously even if both suggest that unpopular issue, “change.”

One note of hope I want to make clear right up front as we- with Jeremiah and Luke’s help- get into apocalyptic (or end times) images we often wish to ignore. Our “tomorrows” all depend on WHO truly holds our future! Whether we look to next week or toward the unknown horizon- whose face do we see? Is the future expectation a time of continued stress, of being overwhelmed, possible destruction OR can we, with faith, see the potential of a time of new beginnings and redemption? Jeremiah says, “The days are coming,” says the Lord, when all shall see the justice and righteousness of God.” In Luke, Jesus speaks of “signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on earth, distress” yet also he speaks of the time when “your redemption is drawing near.”

The good news is the fullness of time is coming- when God’s time is right. Sometimes, the good news does not come as joyful noise and that of which we dreamed, but it always comes simply and wonderfully as a promise of the new world God promises. As Christians, we are a resurrection people and our scriptures come to us today with apocalyptic (or end times) language.

Our verses from Jeremiah come as he is in prison- possibly the worst time to receive a message from God to be shared with the people. Jeremiah is often called “the weeping prophet.” Much of the Book of Jeremiah tells the story of how badly God’s people got caught up in the land and people around them. Even after multiple warnings from God through Jeremiah, this ultimately led to the destruction of their relationship with God and loss of life as

they knew it. The enemy is outside the gates, the soldiers are about to enter the city. Jeremiah is in the king's prison. It seems that we could only expect gloom from the prophet at this point. But Jeremiah, with God's help, has a surprise.

Through him, God promises that the coming devastation is not the last word for the people. Amazingly, God says, "I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel and rebuild them as they were at first." In the verses following these words of promise, God adds that the divine covenant with Israel may be broken by the people, and yet will never be broken by God. What a promise!!

As we turn to the Gospel of Luke- this is our first encounter with Luke as we begin this new Year C in the Lectionary. Luke is one of the most beloved gospels. His world seems kinder and gentler- there are dinner parties, people go on journeys, and Jesus spends lots of time with his disciples, patiently teaching them with some of the most dearly beloved parables in the Christian faith. However, on this first Sunday of Advent, there seems to be little that is positive. The destruction of the temple and Jerusalem is foretold, signs and persecutions are predicted. Jesus points out the signs, strange signs that suggest things are coming to an end. He says, "Look up in the sky, see the signs in the sun, the moon and the stars and on earth, distress among nations."

But the Advent testimony is not just this negative news. By setting these apocalyptic passages at the start of the church year- this being the First Sunday in Advent-the church cannot escape into a cozy, private waiting room near the manger of the Christ Child. Through them the church is forced to face the reality of a human world in need of a God and a Savior. This gives us an opportunity for a clear and faithful focus on the true gift of Christ's birth that we celebrate and can give us a balance and peace so desperately needed in this world of tinsel and material things. The prophecy carries with it a mixture of hope and redemption. The message of Luke is a timeless message for all believers. Living confidently in the realm of God means living in the presence of hope and redemption, whatever the external circumstances. Jesus commands us to "raise your heads," and to offer testimony that "the kingdom of God is near."

In this time of rising and falling, of destruction and birth, disciples of Jesus are to bear testimony. All of our times, particularly our dark and frightening times, are in the hands of God. God is at work in history to bring all things to God's loving purposes. There is undeniable agony in the signs of the times. Yet to those who have faith in a loving and resourceful God, there is also hope.

This is apocalyptic literature- a subject often shied away from, considering it to be strange and gloomy. Ironically, there is a sense in which apocalyptic literature in the Bible ought to make

sense to us in a way that may not have been true in a long time. In many respects, we have always lived in apocalyptic times in which strange images haunt our consciousness- images beyond imagination. As we have worked our way through our Scripture this morning, I would be surprised if some of the realities of the times in which we live have not gone through your minds. These past many months of anxiety and caution because of the pandemic; the unrest in countries around the world- including our own; the struggles to retain political power by manipulating votes of the people; the struggles by our Congress attempting to agree on what actions will benefit hurting Americans; the generations-long struggle for equality regardless of skin color, culture or ethnicity; climate change; poverty; we could go on and on.....

We need to be thankful for the times in which we live, chaotic though they seem but yet filled with possibilities. These are perilous times, it is true. However, I found the following statement and find great value in it. It said: "Our time is like the Chinese character for CRISIS, composed of the symbol for DANGER and the symbol for OPPORTUNITY. This concept seems worth remembering.

As the church, we too, are the "disciples" Jesus addressed when he commanded "raise your heads," and to offer testimony that "the kingdom of God is near." He then goes on to say, "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."

As Christ's disciples in this day and age, we can proclaim that:

- 1) the fulfillment of God's promises are ultimately seen in Jesus' humble coming in Bethlehem and his second coming in glory;
- 2) Jesus sets the standard for justice and righteousness by who he was and in his work;
- 3) God has placed us here at this time for a purpose, which we must discern in order to be faithful and to stand before the Son of Man;
- 4) the church is the gathered people of God, face to face, who together can encourage faith, hope and love for dealing with surprising and unexpected happenings in life;
- 5) whenever we see the powers that threaten us, we must turn to the Lord who comes "with power and great glory;"
- 6) the Lord's glory is defined by love and the culmination of his rule over all, not in disasters (natural or historical).

Christians can be honest, even optimistic about the prospects for our world because, though the world as we know it ends, God's world will just be beginning. Jesus says that this time, our

time that seems so scary and chaotic, is a time for “testimony.” A time for us all to lift up our heads high and share with the world- in words and action- a message that it cannot know if we don’t tell or live it. It is a message that by the grace of God, the worst of times can be the best of time, that an apocalyptic ending is also a redemptive and forever beginning.

So, we look toward tomorrow. We strain toward the future. Shall this be death, or life? Apocalyptic destruction or graceful redemption? We look and see- the face- the face of the one who came into this world as a tiny human baby to save us and make eternal life possible. This face that has always loved us and always will love us- the face of Jesus. Amen

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