

## **First Sunday of Advent**

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast*

*Olentangy Church*

*November 29, 2009*

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

The Lord declares, “Days are coming when I will carry out the good word I spoke about the house of Israel and about the house of Judah. In those days, at that time, for David I will cause a righteous shoot to sprout. He will do justice and righteousness in the land. In those days, Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will have security. And this is what she will be called: ‘The Lord is our righteousness.’”

### **1 Thessalonians 3:9-13**

How can we ever thank God for you — for all the joy we have before our God because of you — as we’re praying, night and day, as much as we possibly can, to see you face to face and to complete what is lacking in your faith?

Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for everyone — just as we do for you — and so strengthen your hearts to be blameless in holiness before our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.

### **Luke 21:25-36 NRSV**

[Jesus said,] 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. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

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. 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. Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. 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.”

### **Sermon**

Advent scares me . . . if I let it. Advent is just four Sundays. Four Sundays with the days in between and with the extra days until Christmas, just twenty-six days this year. But those twenty-six days are enough to scare me . . . if I let them. And the only way not to let them is to ignore them, to ignore them completely, as if those days don’t exist, or to ignore them by pretending it’s already Christmas. But the way to Christmas is through Advent . . . and Advent is scary, scary to anyone who’s paying attention. And on these four Sunday’s at least, that’s what we will try to do: to pay attention, to pay attention to Advent, no matter how scary it is.

### **The Lectionary – the list of Scripture readings for each Sunday – does not want to scare us.**

The reading from Jeremiah, for example, is anything but scary. The people Israel had been scared enough already. First the Assyrians had destroyed the entire northern kingdom, and the people of Ephraim and Manasseh had melted away. That was over a hundred years ago, but not forgotten. And now Babylon had destroyed Judah and Jerusalem. The royal and religious centers had vanished. That was fresh. That was now. That was scary!

But the prophet had a word from the Lord that wasn’t scary at all. It was a good word. It was a promise, a promise once made, now renewed. It was a promise of safety and security, a promise to the people, a

promise to the city, the royal, religious city. It was a promise about a new king, a king again, a king who would set things right, a son of David, who would be the Lord's servant and the people's savior. That's Jeremiah, and there's nothing scary in that word at all.

Then there's the reading from 1 Thessalonians. It's not scary either. Paul is overflowing with thanks to God, thanks for the Christians in Thessalonica. He's thankful for their faith. It's not a perfect, not a complete faith. It's a faith with some holes in it. It's a faith, in other words, a lot like ours, on our best days. But it's a real faith and enough faith to trigger joy in Paul's heart.

He wants their faith to become more. He wants them to grow in the love that flows from and expresses faith. He wants their faith to reshape their lives, to mold their character and their behavior into holiness. In other words, he wants them to become more like Jesus.

And this is no abstract desire. Jesus is coming, and when he comes all people will be summoned before God. The question is, Who will be able to stand? Who will not melt away into nothing before the power and purity of God? Okay, that's scary. But Paul doesn't sound scared, not for himself, not for the Christians in Thessalonica. Why not? Because faith is a work of the Lord. And because the Lord himself will complete our faith and make us strong enough to stand. That's 1 Thessalonians, and it's not scary either.

So, the Lectionary doesn't want to scare us. **But it's Advent and I'm scared . . . and it's Jesus' fault!** Look at the picture Jesus draws in the Gospel reading. This is an Advent picture, a "Jesus is coming!" picture. Listen to his words:

*distress, confusion, fear, foreboding;  
powers shaken, heaven and earth will pass away;  
be on guard;  
an unexpected day, a trap;  
strength to escape.*

Those are scary words. Jesus uses them to paint a scary picture. Sure, there's a positive side to the picture. When Jesus comes, "redemption is drawing near." When the scariness intensifies, "the Kingdom of God is near." And "you may have the strength to escape and to stand before" Jesus on that "day."

But watch out! Watch out!

I wonder what "day" Jesus is talking about. It could be the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. (Jesus does say, "This generation will not pass away until all things have taken place.") It could be the "end of the world," that is, the time when Jesus comes and God wraps everything up. Or it could be any and every moment of crisis or decision.

It could be a time of pandemic disease. Was the Spanish Flu of 1918 an "end of the world" moment? Is that what HIV is in sub-Saharan Africa today? And how are we responding to that? With faith? With hope? With love?

What "day" is Jesus talking about? It could be a time of economic uncertainty. Slow recovery at home, a looming credit crisis in Dubai. Will we look to the Lord in faith? Or will we turn our gaze on so-called "illegal immigrants" and blame our woes on them, forgetting what the Scripture says about justice for the "alien among us"?

What "day" is Jesus talking about? It could be any day. And the question is, the scary question: What burdens weigh on our hearts, burdens that keep us from ever being ready, ready for the "day"? What burdens? Jesus mentions "dissipation, drunkenness, and the worries of this life." That's a comprehensive list.

"Dissipation" is not a word we use much any more. I had to look it up. It's about sensual indulgence. It's about excess. I wonder how much of that is on our Christmas lists this year. I wonder how much of our lives are about satisfying our own appetites:

*for delicious desserts,  
for stylish clothes,  
for the latest toys,  
for the perfect personal sleep system,  
for the best doctor, the most amazing view, the surest investment.*

We can "dissipate" in all kinds of ways.

Then there's drunkenness, and we all know what that is. Of course, we numb ourselves with more than alcohol these days. We have prescription drugs and illicit drugs for longer and more intense effect. And we numb ourselves with TV shows, movies, and music. And we lose ourselves in celebrity gossip. (What did go on with Tiger Woods the other night?) We lose ourselves in news and in politics. We know all kinds of ways to get numb.

Finally, Jesus lists the worries of this life. This is what we're left with when self-indulgence and self-medication fail us. We worry about keeping up with the mortgage and about rebuilding a broken marriage. We worry about kids with no insurance and about taking care of a sick mother. We worry about a cat with diabetes and about those extra ten pounds. We worry, and our worries keep us up at night. We worry, and our worries consume us, what's left of us.

All of these things leave us less than ready for the "day," for any day. They turn our attention from God. They turn us away from faith. They turn us away from hope. They turn us inward and away from love, away from receiving love and away from giving love. And when we can't receive love, we can't receive Jesus. And when we can't give love, we can't be like Jesus. And when we're so far from Jesus, we're not ready for the "day." Not for his day. Not for a day of crisis or decision. Not for any day, not even tomorrow.

So let's own up to it all, to our dissipation, drunkenness, and worry. Let's own up to our hole-y faith – our faith that's filled with holes. And let's plead with the Lord to complete what's lacking in our faith. And let's plead with the Lord to strengthen us until we can stand, until we can stand on the "day" when he comes to put everything right, which is the day that Advent, scary Advent, is always pointing to.