



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

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November 29, 2015

A Sermon by Brent J. Eelman

The Promise of the Future

Jeremiah 33: 14-2-16

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfil the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ¹⁵In 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. ¹⁶In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.'

Luke 21:25-36

'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. ²⁶People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in a cloud" with power and great glory. ²⁸Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.'

29 Then he told them a parable: 'Look at the fig tree and all the trees; ³⁰as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. ³¹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³²Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. ³³Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

34 'Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, ³⁵like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶Be 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.'

Three years ago the Northeast, including Philadelphia, where I was living, was about to be hit by a huge hurricane. It was nicknamed, "Frankenstorm". Its "proper given name" was *Sandy* and it was predicted to hit Philadelphia with a vengeance. The ominous predictions were voiced for about a week, accompanied by advice regarding what we should do to prepare. In the words of the weather forecasters, "the days were surely coming" when we would experience not inches but feet of rain. "The days were surely coming" when shorelines and resort communities would be turned upside down with wind and wave. "The days were surely coming" when basements would flood, power would be lost, and trees would fall on houses and cars. And so we residents of the Northeast braced ourselves for the ominous future.

We bought extra food. We stored water. We had batteries. We dug out the candles and flash lights. We found the old transistor radio and made sure it would still work. We prepared ourselves for disaster, "Frankenstorm" was about to strike.

It did, and some places were hit worse than predicted, (particularly the New Jersey Shore). Others felt fortunate for only incurring minimal inconvenience. Some are still displaced today by Sandy's destruction. The storm arrived... just as predicted.

When we think about the future, many of us feel as though we are preparing for a storm. There is a lot noise in the air that encourages this thinking. We hear about the shaky, violent, even nuclear future that looms over the Middle-East. We have all types of questions about the economy. We hear apocalyptic visions regarding climate change and the implications for the earth.

Sometimes it feels like we are all preparing for a storm. That is what the future looks like. And so we "hunker down" emotionally, spiritually, and physically. We brace ourselves for the storm that is surely coming. Our tacit objective is to survive; somehow make it through the storm. Often this is the way we live each day... somehow we try and make it through, and sadly that is all we do. We make it through.

Christian faith offers an alternative vision. It is the vision of Advent: a message of hope declaring the purpose of life is not merely to survive the storm, not merely to get through the moment or day. The alternative Christian vision of Advent is one of promise. This vision is 1. Realistic. 2. Rooted in history. 3. Transformational.

I

The promise of Advent is realistic. Both Jeremiah and Jesus spoke of an amazing promise of justice and redemption. Jeremiah proclaimed that a ruler/king in tradition of David would come. In Jeremiah's words: "*he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety.*" That was hopeful! It was good news! It was something worth living for!

Jesus declared: "*when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.*" This is the promise of biblical faith. It is what we pray for daily, "Thy kingdom come on earth."

But this was not some "pie in the sky, bye and bye" nonsense. Both of these declarations took place in the midst of tumultuous and violent change: indeed the storms of history. Jeremiah declared this message of promise and hope, while the Babylonians were conquering Judah. Soon they would cart off all the leadership and intelligentsia to Babylon where they would be in captivity for two generations. All of this was about to happen and Jeremiah knew it. He, himself, would become a captive! Yet he would declare with the authority of God:

The days are surely coming... when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah... Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety.

The message of Jesus anticipated the destruction of the temple and the loss of Hebrew national and religious identity. Jesus' words anticipated the suffering that would befall those who followed him. He was realistic about it, and yet he declared: "*Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.*"

The promise of Advent is realistic. It does sugarcoat the realities with which we live. It does not bury its head in sand regarding the future. No! Advent anticipates the promise of the future with hope!

II

The promise of Advent is rooted in history. Christian faith is an historical religion. It is the story of God acting in creation and human history. It is the story of eternity entering time and space. The central historical event, (the event by which we understand all other historical events), is the Christ event: the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Advent is the time when we remember how the people longed for salvation.. just as we do today. We remember and read with new power the words of the prophets and the promise of a Messiah. We read those words and affirm that the prophecy was fulfilled in the backwater town of Bethlehem when the child was born to Nazarene parents from the Galilee. We remember this history, and it assures us that God's promises for the future are sure and will be fulfilled. The promise of Advent is rooted in history.

III

The promise of Advent is transformational. Advent is a promise that changes history and it changes us.

- It transforms us to live fearlessly and hopefully in the present.
- It means that we need not fear the storms of life, (and there are storms).
- It transforms how we understand the events of life and their importance.
- It transforms our interpretation of life itself.

The big moments, the important moments become:

- the smile from a stranger when we feel lost and alone.
- It is the hug we get from a loved one when we are overcome with pain or fear.
- It is the small piece of bread, the small cup of juice that suddenly become for us a feast... a feast of grace, hope, and love. Indeed, the feast of the people of God.

I began this homily with these words: *“Sometimes it feels that we are all preparing for a storm. That is what the future looks like. And so we “hunker down” emotionally, spiritually, and physically. We brace ourselves for the storm that is surely coming. Our tacit objective is to survive; somehow make it through the storm.”*

Sometimes it feels like we are preparing for a storm... But the message of Advent is this: Storms will come and go, but we are preparing for the fulfillment of history, the promise of a messiah and a messianic age of justice and truth. We live in the moment (this moment!) clinging to this promise. Whatever storms of life befall us, we raise our heads because our redemption is drawing near. Come, Lord Jesus, Come. Amen.