

“Christmas as a Crystal Ball”*
Sermon text: Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36
December 3, 2006
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Some of you might have noticed this morning that the “Holy Family” is back for Advent. Yes, we will fix that leak again. Those who are visiting might be interested in knowing that for many years we had what appeared to be Mary, Joseph, the baby Jesus, and four or five wise men sitting up there on the ceiling. We will repair the leak once more, but I am glad they are back for this sacred season.

One Thanksgiving several years ago, Al and I went to Alabama to visit his relatives. When the time came for us to get into the car and drive back to Atlanta I said, “Here it is, pitch black dark. I wish we were not leaving so late.”

Al said, “Joanna, it’s 5 o’clock.”

I said glumly, “It feels like the middle of the night to me.” Darkness descends earlier and earlier this time of year. When we lit the first candle on the wreath this morning, it was not a second too soon.

How odd that the most hopeful season on the Christian calendar begins in the midst of darkness. This December I sense a special urgency of need for the light that comes from God. I don’t think I’m the only one who is longing for Christmas this year. I try not to be a crepe hanger, but Lord have mercy, these are troubling and dark days. The war in Iraq has lasted so long. The world appears to be more broken than ever: Misery and violence in the Sudan, shootings in our nation and our cities – a 92 year-old woman in our city – shot. What is the world coming to? Clouds of anxiety hover so close and low, you can barely see your hand in front of your face this December.

Here is another odd thing: This first Sunday in Advent marks the beginning – are you ready – of a new year for the Christian Church. Forget confetti and champagne. Bring on the apocalypse. We spend this first Sunday in Advent thinking about the end of the world. We consciously begin our

preparations for the coming of the Christ Child with a heart-stopping passage in which Jesus speaks of signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and, on earth, distress among nations...people will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming into the world. . . “then they will see the Son of Man coming with power and great glory.”

This kind of talk would ordinarily make me want to crawl under the bed and stay there, but this year I am holding on for dear life for the reassurance that God intends to make the world right again. Jeremiah’s little book of consolation is similarly reassuring: “The days are surely coming when I will fulfill the promises that I made for the house of Israel and to the house of Judah.” Apparently with God, if God says something will happen, it **will** happen.

How Jeremiah found in himself the strength and the vision to be hopeful about the future, I will never know. His people were under siege at the hands of the Babylonians, and there was nowhere you could look and see any sign of hope, but the prophet was undaunted. He was convinced that God fully intended to finish the work of redemption and to overthrow all that is chaotic and cruel and destructive about the present order, so that shalom, reconciliation, and healing could overtake all of reality.

Our present day is rife with millennialists who are drooling over the prospects of the end of the world. I worry that many of them are motivated less by hope than by the desire to see those whom they consider to be God’s unfavored get their just desserts. A friend of mine once saw a sign in front of a bait shop up in north Georgia on a country road. It read, “Smile, our God is a consuming fire.”

I prefer the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. who told us how to think about the future in relation to these present days. “We must accept finite disappointment but we must never lose infinite hope,” he said.

Is the promised coming of Christ bad news for some, or is it good news for all? Jesus implies that it will be a fearful thing for just about everyone when the powers of heaven are shaken. But then he goes on to say, “But when these things take place, stand up and raise your heads because your redemption is drawing near.” Not your destruction, but your redemption. What a strange blend of warning and comfort.

Such news puts me in mind of my recent cataract surgery. Days before the procedure I was given several sets of drops to put in my eye, four times a day. The drops came with complex instructions and warnings. Then after the cataract removal procedure was completed, I was told in no uncertain terms: Do not sleep on your back. Do not pick up a sack of groceries. And never, never, never touch your eye. I became convinced that if I did not do exactly what I was told, I would never see again, and it really would be the end of the world as I knew it. And yet, here's the strange thing – while all this was going on, I could sense the deep care and compassion of my doctor and of all the kind people associated with his medical practice. Everyday for a week after the surgery I received a phone call, in which someone from the clinic inquired as to my well-being and vision capacity. It turns out that the point of both the warnings and the compassion was the same. It was to help me see better.

Jesus had the same purpose in mind when he spoke in heart-stopping terms of the end of the world and then reassured his followers with that hopeful story of the fig tree and all the trees that are going to be sprouting leaves all around you. Whenever you see the new breaking forth, then you know the Kingdom of God is near. He was performing cataract surgery on his followers, was he not? He wants us to be able to see things for what they are and not to be fooled by the powers of this world who are genuinely convinced that they will reign for ever and ever. That is not so. God is the Omega as well as the Alpha.

An inter-city pastor whose church does great and faithful things for the community and touches thousands of lives of children and elderly and young people was asked once how he kept his congregation motivated, and he said, “It’s not me, it’s all of us, and what we have done is to read the Bible. We know how the story ends. We are not at the end, but we know how it ends. And that is what makes all the difference.”(1)

Isaiah expressed it with such exhilarating confidence, “Eye hath not seen, ear heard nor yet entered the human heart all that God has prepared for those who love him.”

A woman raised a large family of fine children by herself with no money and no education of her own. She was asked how she did it. She answered, “I saw a new world coming.”

Oh, the power of hope. In the waiting room at the hospital the doctor can say to the family, “I think I got it; I think I got all the cancer.” And before you know it someone is saying, “Well, do you think we ought to go to the cafeteria and have a little breakfast?” And people start to smile, and the heart is transformed. Hope can live on one calorie a day, and it can change everything. (2) Hope can walk a million miles with cardboard in its shoes. Hope can transform a person, a community, a nation, because hope energizes and encourages. Despair and cynicism do nothing but destroy and lead to dead ends.

Friends, in spite of much evidence to the contrary, we are on course for the goodness made possible by God. You can see it popping out here and there and everywhere.

One of the darkest events of this past fall for our nation and for the Amish community in Pennsylvania was the terrible slaughter of little children in the schoolhouse. But the slaughter was not the end of the story. Do you remember how members of the Amish community cooked meals and took them to the family of the killer? Do you remember the television interview with the grandfather of one of the victims? The reporter asked, “I hear you have forgiven the man who killed your granddaughter. Is that true?”

“Yes,” the old man answered.

“How could you?” the reporter said.

The grandfather answered, “With God’s help, I could.”(3)

Do you see what I mean? A sign that God’s goodness is already pushing back the darkness. Listen, optimism is no good for anybody. Optimism glibly denies the ambiguities and real cruelties of this life. No one needs sweet, sweet optimism. What the world needs is radical hope: hope not in the human spirit, not in human goodness, but in the power of God to transform the human spirit. It is quite true that we cannot see the future, but, as the African American faith community has always known, “We know who holds the future.” That knowledge is more than enough to keep us going.

When the angel appeared to Mary and told her that she was to conceive and bear a Son, and he would fill the throne that had belonged to David the king,

she was frightened and anxious, but she agreed to play her part in God's great plan of redemption. Because she trusted God with the future, the world has never been the same.

There is much work to do. Much watchful readiness to maintain. The story is told from the Colonial period of American history of an eclipse of the sun. The eclipse caught the members of a New England state legislature off guard. They thought it was the end of the world. Anxiety reigned. But in the midst of the panic, when a motion was made to adjourn, one of the legislators stood up and said, "Mister Speaker, if it is not the end of the world, and we adjourn, we shall appear to be fools. But if it is the end of the world, I choose to be found doing my duty. I move you, sir, let the candles be brought."

And so, let us bring on the Advent candles and live in hope and act in love until our Savior comes again. Amen.

* Much of this sermon is taken from my Advent reflection entitled "Light the Candles," published in *The Christian Century*, November 28, 2006, p.18.

(1) as told by K.C. Ptomey in a sermon in which he cited a *Presbyterian Outlook* article by Theodore Wardlaw, 9/25/95.

(2) from notes from a long-ago preaching seminar with Fred B. Craddock.

(3) K. C. Ptomey, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Nashville, TN 10/8/06.

"Nothing worth doing can be accomplished in a life time; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful or good makes sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone. Therefore, we are saved by love. "

Reinhold Niebuhr