

Sermon for Advent 1 Year C

[RCL] Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-9; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36

“Be on your guard,” our Lord advises us in no uncertain terms in today’s reading from near the end of the Gospel of Luke. Odd advice, we might be tempted to think, at the beginning of yet another Advent season – a time when we are more inclined to anticipate the joy of the coming Christmas season than to be on guard against unspecified perils. Still, mindfulness is indeed Jesus’ admonishment to us this day. Pay attention to the details – to the signs about you. “Be alert.”

And, it is perhaps good advice after all.

The world is still full of surprises and not all of them are pleasant. Just catch the latest news on the internet or television if you have any doubts on that score. The “distress among the nations” of which our Lord also speaks in our Gospel account is with us still, though the names and boundaries of the nations in question may have changed a bit over the years. Conflicts and wars remain with us today as in centuries past. The “fear and foreboding” of which Jesus warns are as real and deep as ever.

Indeed, they are palpable even in the midst of our sacred Advent season, as terrorist bombs in lands faraway threaten airliners and gunmen massacre innocents on campuses and street corners in our own cities. The machinery of evil may have changed over the centuries but the technology of the human heart remains the same as it ever was. In times such as these, it is easy to become – if you will excuse the infelicitous expression – gun-shy; to hunker down and love only those we already love; and trust only what we know for sure – even when it is manifestly not so.

Yet it is just at times such as these that God so often insists upon challenging our deepest anxieties and prejudices and surprising us yet again with divine mercy and redemption. That is also the message of today’s Gospel narrative. Even in the midst of the world’s confusion and chaos, Jesus reassures us, “The kingdom of God is near,” as difficult as it may sometimes be to discern its presence. Rather than hunker down, “Stand up,” commands our Lord, “and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

Our Lord too lived in turbulent times not so different from our own – born of destitute and near-homeless parents forced to seek shelter for the night in a backyard village lean-to of all places – not exactly the palace of a prince or king. Yet, the surprise of Christ’s incarnation forces us to look again in our own age at the “signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars;” and to consider anew the signs of God’s intimate involvement in the world about us.

Advent is the season when we learn to overcome our “fear and foreboding” and once more open our hearts to others just as God has disclosed and demonstrated his love for us in Christ. Advent requires a certain element of mindfulness – of keeping awake and alert to the universe around us – and to the cosmos within us. It requires as well, a certain sense of recognition and acceptance of others with all their spiritual baggage and insecurities – no small order in an age of polarization and mistrust.

Of course, being on the spiritual welcoming committee has never been an easy task. Who or what are we waiting for, we might well ask. Who or what are we welcoming? Refugees perhaps, from lands far different than our own? Homeless beggars at freeway on-ramps? Christ after all came in a manner completely new and unexpected. Would we have recognized him at rest in that feed-trough outside Bethlehem so long ago? Would we have known to welcome him? His coming is still hotly debated and even denied, his very existence a sign of contradiction for many.

He brought joy, but we still know sadness. He brought life, but we still know death. So, putting out the welcome mat and hanging the “Open for Business” sign in the window of our hearts can seem a scary proposition this Advent season or anytime. As we secure our airports, screen our visitors, and look over our shoulder it can become all too easy to forget about welcome and human commerce altogether.

The near-apocalyptic scene painted in our Gospel account of confusion and distress has become an unfortunate reality in too many parts of our world today. Sometimes even our neighbor can seem the enemy. Come to think of it, perhaps we need to install a metal detector here at the entrance to our church building. One cannot be too careful these days.

Good thing God did not – and does not -- see things that way. Good thing God thought we and our world were worth yet another chance. Otherwise, we ourselves might still be left out in the cold and dark; left alone with our “fear and foreboding”; left alone perhaps in a smelly old barn bereft of angels, shepherds, and virgin mother.

So Advent is also a season of hope. It is a time that reminds us, in God’s scheme of things, the laws of entropy do not necessarily apply and the universe will not continue to get darker and colder forever. Our spiritual winter will come to an end. The fig tree – and dogwood as well – will again blossom and bloom. “Summer is near,” our Lord reassures us – even at the beginning of Advent. “Our redemption is drawing near.”

Perhaps only a genuine follower of Christ can remain vigilant and on guard for the coming of God’s kingdom in a world such as ours. Perhaps only a genuine follower of Christ, mindful of the incarnation, can hear of a spiritual summer of redemption and understand that – no matter the human or earthly season – Christ’s word and promise to his people “will not pass away.”

Written by Rev. Dr. Frank Hegedus

The Rev. Dr. Frank Hegedus, a priest of the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles, is currently chaplain and area dean at Saint Margaret’s Anglican Episcopal Church in Budapest, Hungary, a ministry of the Church of England’s Diocese in Europe. Please visit and “like” Saint Margaret’s Facebook website page at www.anglicanbudapest.com.

Published by the Office of Mission Communications of the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society, 815 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017.

© 2015 The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America. All rights reserved.