

ADVENT I

Year C

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During Advent and Christmas, we will be using study prompts and other activities tied to the sermon for the week. Read the sermon aloud and follow-up with spoken responses to the two questions at the end. Find our full sermon compilation for individual, small group, or congregational use, *Sermons for Advent and Christmas 2024* at www.sermonsthatwork.org

We Are Waiting

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

We are living in a time of significant change. Whether it is the up and down of elections; the energy and tension embedded in politics in the public square, international conflicts and wars, climate change, or shifts in the economy, there is a feeling of uncertainty in the air. The whitewater rapids nature of our common life leaves many scared, questioning, and hopeless. It seems that things are out of control. Or, at least out of *our* control. Perhaps that is the point. We are not in control.

The first Sunday of Advent reminds us that we are not in control. It also provides direction and reassurance amid the chaos and confusion. This first Sunday of the church's calendar year invites us to suspend our linear notions of time. The season of Advent reminds us of *Kairos* time: deep time. A time that requires us to suspend the false control of *Chronos* time. It asks us to move away from dependence on false narratives. We are invited to make meaning of narratives that call on us to wait for God's realm.

The Gospel reinforces all of this when Jesus speaks with an apocalyptic voice. 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."

It is tempting to try to parse out Jesus' words and make literal connections with our current time. Equally enticing is the desire to use Jesus' words to predict the future. This, however, is beyond the larger point of what God is communicating to us this Advent season. The famous theologian and preacher Frederick Buechner provides a framework for thinking about Luke's words as we start Advent. He writes, "Does he mean there will be real eclipses and strange comets that have never been seen before, maybe a reordering of the constellations themselves to scrawl some fateful starlit message across the night sky? Or is he speaking symbolically of some upheaval not of the world without but of the world within – an upheaval of the hearts and minds and spirits of the human race?" He continues, "I think we are waiting. That is what is at the heart of it. Even when we don't know that we are waiting, I think we are waiting. Even when we can't find words for what we are waiting for, I think we are waiting."

We are waiting during this season for the birth of baby Jesus. As Christians, we slow down from the busyness of an always-on culture and the distractions of ever-present cell phones to prepare our hearts and minds for Jesus' birth.

We are waiting for baby Jesus to be born. We are also waiting for the healing of the world. We are waiting for a transformation of the systems and institutions that seemingly have great control over the big picture of our lives. We are waiting for just and civil relationships between people and

among communities and nations. We are waiting for a new ethic of love, peace, and justice to envelop us. In the waiting, we are called to prepare ourselves and to be on guard. Our calling in the waiting is to move beyond busyness into preparation of a solidity in our interiority.

Jesus tells us, “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.” It might seem strange to joyfully wait in anticipation of Jesus’ birth against the backdrop of the apocalyptic words in Luke.

Susan Garrett reminds us that the apocalyptic view of events on Earth is often used in scripture to reflect things happening on a higher plane. More is happening than what first meets the eye. We are waiting for the birth of Jesus who is also the one on whom we have been waiting to bring peace and justice on earth. And yet, we cannot take our eyes off the warning of a stirring of chaos and disruption. So, we are invited to stay awake and be ready. Jesus tells us that we are to be on guard, “alert at all times, praying that [we] may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

The tension that comes during this time of waiting can lend itself to confusion. It’s in times like this that it helps to look to a prophet. Prophets point beyond “what *is*” and can help us to be ready for “what *is to come*.” Prophets trouble the waters of our now and point to what can and ought to be. Our lectionary invites us to grapple with the words of the prophet Jeremiah, who found hope during difficult times with challenges well beyond our own. Angela Bauer-Levesque writes about Jeremiah in *The People’s Companion to the Bible*. She observes that the Book of Jeremiah is “located in its initial layer of voices, in the seventh century BCE in the years leading up to the experiences of dislocation and exile in Babylon. [T]he book warns of impending disaster, then tells of the actual war and destruction and of the various ways the people and their leaders responded to the crisis.” Furthermore, “Prophet

and people search together and separately, to make sense of their experiences of war and violence, chaos and attempts at resistance, defeat and daily life.”

This is what Jeremiah is doing in our reading today: “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In 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. In 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.”

Scholars of the text caution us to refrain from reflexively seeing the New Testament as the fulfillment of the prophetic words of the Hebrew Bible. Rather, we should, as Walter Brueggemann posits, recognize that the “prophetic promises” of Jeremiah “continue to be generative and revelatory” for the “promised newness is always yet again to be discerned and received.” We listen to Jeremiah and recognize that we, too, are waiting for a righteous branch of David to spring up. Who is this one that is to come and bring forward justice and righteousness? We wait. We wait with the hopefulness of Jeremiah, “The Lord is our righteousness.” In waiting for the righteousness of the Lord to come, we are focused on the Realm of God to spring forth. Walter Wink writes, “The advent we are waiting for is not an apocalypse, but the beginning of human beings again and again as they recommit themselves to bring the Realm of God here.”

We prayed earlier for God to “give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.” On this first Sunday of Advent, let us find the hope of Jeremiah and the continued generativity of the promised newness his words give to us in this time. May we prepare ourselves and stay on guard. As we wait for the birth of baby Jesus, may we understand our anticipation as part of our recommitment to living in the Realm of God that is coming with great glory. Amen.

Prompts

When was a time when you felt the need to control a situation but instead chose to wait? What was the outcome, and how did that experience shape your understanding of waiting?

As a group or individually, research a figure you view as a modern prophet working toward justice and peace. Share what you've learned with a small group.