

Connecting With Christmas
Advent Communion 2009
Jeremiah 33:14-16, Luke 21:25-36

“Watch for this,” the Lord said in the Old Testament lectionary passage. “The time is coming when I will keep my promise.” That’s the sense of Jeremiah 33:14. That’s what God wanted his people to understand in the midst of difficult circumstances then. In the New Testament lectionary passage, Luke 21:34, Jesus said: “Be on your guard. Don’t let the sharp edge of your expectation get dulled.”

Jan Richardson, in her book *Night Visions: Searching the Shadows of Advent and Christmas* [Pilgrim Press, 1998], wants us to be aware:

“The season of Advent means there is something on the horizon the likes of which we have never seen before. . . . What is possible is not to see it -- to miss it, to turn just as it brushes past you. And you begin to grasp what it was you missed, like Moses in the cleft of the rock, watching God's [back] fade in the distance. So stay. Sit. Linger. Tarry. Ponder. Wait. Behold. Wonder. There will be time enough for running. For rushing. For worrying. For pushing. For now, stay. Wait. Something is on the horizon.”

Watch! Be on your guard! Stay sharp! Something is on the horizon the likes of which you have never seen before! In other words, let’s not miss the ways God wants to connect with us this Christmas!

Getting connected at Christmas is not an unusual theme. Who does not want to connect with family and friends, with love and faith, perhaps even with God? For the meaning underlying Christmas surely contains all the best hopes of family and friends, of love and compassion toward others, and of faith in God! That’s why, over the next few weeks, we will speak about these places of connection. And on Christmas Eve, we will respond again to God’s loving connection with all humanity by celebrating the birth of Jesus.

For many, Christmastime is joyous and hopeful and filled with wonder. But for many others, hope and joy are rare experiences. I think about those who are struggling with hard circumstances in their lives, such as: loneliness, depression, deep hurt, emotional injury, personal injustices, grief over loved ones who have died, job loss, reduced financial resources, the seeming inability to overcome addictions, the physical decline associated with aging and even the darkest of human tragedies such as war and human trafficking about which we learned earlier this month. But are we not all looking for the connections of compassion and security and justice for all people that we see in Jeremiah 33:16 where the motto was “GOD Will Set Things Right for Us”? That is the real hope of Christmas. So we take the promise of Scripture and watch and wait and stay sharp for the ultimate fulfilment of that promise of salvation from God.

Today is the beginning of a new year in the Christian Church. We call this season Advent. The word “advent” essentially means the “arrival” of something or someone. This morning, we lit the first of four Advent candles to celebrate the arrival of God’s promise of hope into the darkness of the world. This is the promise of Jesus Christ, who is also called Immanuel, which means “**God**

with us” in human form. That is a remarkable celebration, my friends, “the likes of which we have never seen before.” And God does not want anyone to miss it.

We heard Luke 21 read in the *Good News Bible* earlier. Here is how *The Message Bible* puts it:

“Be on your guard. Don’t let the sharp edge of your expectation get dulled by parties and drinking and shopping. Otherwise, that Day is going to take you by complete surprise, spring on you suddenly like a trap, for it’s going to come on everyone, everywhere, at once. So, whatever you do, don’t go to sleep at the switch. Pray constantly that you will have the strength and wits to make it through everything that’s coming and end up on your feet before the Son of Man.”

What is it that people are to expect? In Luke 21, the expectation Jesus was speaking of has more to do with the end of time and the *Second Advent* of Jesus Christ --or the Son of Man as he refers to himself in this Scripture -- rather than the First Advent we are now celebrating. But without the first arrival of God in Jesus, there would be no Second Advent. Jesus said that before his Second Coming occurs, there will be signs and wonders on Earth and also signs in the heavens. The sun, the moon and stars will signal signs of this end time. Jesus clearly speaks in Luke 21 of a cosmic event of universal significance. The signs are not something that can be restricted to this or that people or place, for they will come to all and be seen by everyone.

I am not, however, someone who can connect all the dots regarding these signs except to say that, in the past few decades, several global realities have been reminders of the *possibility* of the End Times. Paul Scott Wilson, professor of preaching at our United Church Emmanuel College, noted the following:

“No sooner had the Cold War ended and the threat of nuclear holocaust been reduced ... than the press was filled with successive warnings about the ozone hole altering DNA in frogs and humans, global warming and the rising of the seas, the threat of oceans being contaminated by radioactivity from the rusting hulks of the abandoned Russian Bering Sea fleet, and NASA searching for rogue asteroids that could wipe out life as we know it on this planet.”

Such warnings *are* valuable cautions. They remind us not to ignore what Jesus taught about the end of time when he will come again. But let’s be careful of saying we know when this will happen. We don’t know. And Jesus did not say when but he did say to be ready and be watching with expectation for he can come at any time.

There are certain things we can affirm that are positive and life-giving for our day in this teaching of Jesus from Luke’s Gospel. Again I am grateful to Paul Wilson for his outline in *The Lectionary Commentary* [Van Harn, R. (2001). Grand Rapids, Mich., Eerdmans].

1. It is important to affirm that there *will* be an end of time. Human life does have limitations set upon it, both in terms of individual actions and our time as a race upon this planet. But it is also significant to know the end of time does not mean the end of life with God.

2. God is in charge of this end time and all time. As human beings we are not in charge, no matter how much we think we are. We are called to trust God in contemplating the future, for it is this same God who comes to us at the end of time. Time will end, but God's Word will not (verse 33).
3. This God who created humanity at the beginning is worthy of all trust. Paul Wilson makes the following observation:

“God is not a spoiled child who is about to have a tantrum and destroy creation. Rather, the [end of time] should be regarded as **the time of fulfilment** of all of God's promises. There is a sentence upon all who have failed to live according to God's law, and [that] is a good thing: just as God sets a limit on the power evil can have over us, God sets a limit on all injustice and sin. It will not continue forever. The days of sin and injustice are numbered.”

4. When we think of the future, the clearest sign of what to expect and what we should do as we wait has been given in Jesus Christ and his ongoing presence in the Church. We are not to be distracted by the superficial things in life. Our hands are to be Christ's hands in our world and for its people everywhere who experience damage and injury. The love and compassion of God comes through in our human attitudes and actions in caring for others. We have work to do while we watch and wait. My friends, that is remarkably hopeful.
5. Finally, we are wise to keep the marvellous message of Jesus in this Scripture in our hearts and minds: When we think that the end (whether of our personal days or of time itself) is at hand, when we think we cannot cope anymore, when we think God seems to have forgotten about us, when the suffering of others continues unabated -- we are not farthest from our salvation but closest to it. We are not left alone. God will be with us even as Jesus could always be found in the midst of the greatest human need. So let's look up, as Jesus said, for our redemption will draw near (21:28) when God will put all things right as he promised. As Revelation 21:4-5 promises: “God will wipe away all tears from their eyes. There will be no more death, no more grief or crying or pain. The old things have disappeared ... and now I make all things new.... These words are true and can be trusted.”

We can make a serious connection with God this Christmas because of the First Advent of Jesus. We know there is nothing sentimental about Jesus' entrance into the world. He was born into a working-class Jewish family in the backwaters of the Roman Empire. We know his birth and his early life was a time of struggle for his family and for Jesus. We know, even as a baby, his life was in danger. We know his family had to escape to another country – Egypt -- or else Jesus would have been killed. Trouble was no stranger to Jesus. He has no difficulty understanding our human condition, no matter who we are or where we live on this planet.

It is fitting, then, that we make our **first connection this Christmas** with God in Jesus through Communion. When we eat the bread and drink from the cup, we connect personally and intimately with the One who fully understands our human frailties, our hurts, our sins and our damaged spirits and bodies. Jesus is “the Word” who lived in loving relationship with God. Jesus is “the Word” who came to live with us human beings because of God's great love for us. Jesus is “the Word” who has come to be the love and justice of God for us all. In the Gospel of John

1:14, the Apostle John wrote:

“And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.”

I have quoted John 1:14 before from *The Message* Bible. Here it is again:

“The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, generous inside and out, true from start to finish.”

I love that statement: “The Word [meaning Jesus] became flesh and blood and moved into the *neighborhood*.” On his First Advent, Jesus came to live among us, work as we do and experience life like us. Jesus Christ is not out of touch with our reality. He has been through weakness and testing and experienced everything life could throw at him – even death. Yet as the Scripture says in Hebrews 4, he experienced all the difficulties of life but he did not sin. That is why Jesus is worthy of our faith and trust and hope.

My friends, God’s deep desire is to connect with you and with me this morning. Helmut Thielicke was a well-known German theologian in the mid-20th century. He noted that recognizing God wants to connect with us is everything when we study the stories of Jesus. To illustrate, he told of a time when his son was still a babe in arms. He held his son up in front of a mirror and watched what happened. When the baby moved, the reflection moved. When the baby waved, the reflection waved. Suddenly the youngster’s face lit up. He realized -- that’s me!

That can often happen when we read the Bible today. We read black print on a white page, telling stories about something that happened far away and a long time ago. But as we read the text of Scripture, if we are looking intently as we read, we can recognize a reflection of ourselves. That can also happen when we eat the bread and drink the cup in Communion. Remember, after his resurrection, Jesus had a meal with two of his followers in their home. And he made himself known -- Jesus connected with them -- in the breaking of the bread.

This morning, may this be so for you and for me.

Rev. Chris Miller
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