

Advent 1, December 2, 2018. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church , Freeland WA
Nigel Taber-Hamilton. Jeremiah 33:14-16; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36

Advent: the Blue Season! Who remembers when Advent used to be purple? We use purple in Lent, and Lent is undeniably a penitential season. How easy, then, to assume that Advent is too, because we use purple – or used to, anyway. I think today's gospel reading – which is the first in this season – is partly to blame for the penitential purple.

This particular part of Luke, along with similar passages in Mark (ch. 13) and Matthew (ch. 24) have done more harm than good in Christian history. Those groups convinced they have figured out when the end times will be (usually it's in the immediate future) – and what they'll be like (that others – not them – will get their 'comeuppance'!) have gotten up to what one scholar has called "mischief and malfeasance." Like the Essenes in Jesus' time, they're all too ready and willing to withdraw from the world, abrogating every human being's obvious responsibility to be engaged in our world for good. These are the folk who seem to delight at believing that the "bad news is only for others, and that this bad news is, for them, really good news." This is where the theology of "rapture" come in – that when Jesus returns they'll all fly away into heaven leaving the rest to die terrible deaths. My personal protest at that theology can be summed up by a bumper sticker: "Come the Rapture, can I have your car?"

Yet even for those of us who don't go down that ugly pathway – and I'm willing to put money on that being all of us here today – it's still sometimes easier to believe bad news than good – or, at least, to believe that what even the Gospel writers presented as good news doesn't look at all good to us – that everything seems to be ending, and the Divine Judge is waiting, gavel in hand.

Part of our challenge with that vision has to do with how the idea of "ending" has been tied to what we've been taught about the Kingdom or Reign of God. For much of Christian history, the story has been told that the Kingdom is not here, will not be here; rather the language about God's kingdom, God's reign has become future focused. You'll find some of that future-focused theology in the Book of Common Prayer, Evangelical Lutheran Worship, the United Methodist Hymnal, The Presbyterian Book of Common Worship, and so on. In other words, pretty much every denomination has dabbled in this theology at some time or another! As one of my clergy friends said once, "sometimes those prayers sound a little like fire insurance for the next life!"

That view that the kingdom is not here is not particularly helped by the Gospel we just finished reading in Year B: Matthew. Matthew talks about the "Kingdom of Heaven" while Luke and Mark talk about the "Kingdom of God." That's a significant difference, a profound shift, in meaning, because so often we've been taught that "heaven" isn't here, but somewhere else. The Kingdom, the Reign of God, gets moved one step further away from us.

All you need to do is put together a future-focused other-world location for God's Kingdom with the word "Heaven" substituted for God – the Kingdom of Heaven – stir in the uncertain, challenging times in which we live, and today's gospel reading suddenly becomes quite scary.

That was never what Jesus – or even John the Baptist – mean when they talked about the coming

Kingdom! When John proclaimed (as Mark recorded it in Chapter 1) that “the Kingdom of God is at hand” he wasn’t thinking of some world-ending event being necessary for it to come into being.

That’s completely in keeping with what Jeremiah says: Jeremiah speaks words of hope. A branch, full of blossoms and eventually fruit, is bursting forth from an arid and broken nation. Life abounds beneath the current uncertainties. And that life happens in the place that you call home, this “Sweet Land of Liberty”. That’s what Jeremiah meant when he wrote about Judah being saved. If we walk with God we will be the vehicles through which our “home” – in all the rich meanings of that word – will be saved. That’s where John the Baptist and Jeremiah overlap. John had in mind the coming here on earth of a time when – as Jeremiah puts it in today’s first reading – there will be “justice and righteousness in the land”....”: **transformation, not termination.**

I also believe we mistake Jesus’ parable about the fig tree to be a once-for-all moment. Summer comes *every year*; the fig tree will flourish *every year*; in fact the idea of a fig tree producing fruit only once is bizarre! The Kingdom comes all the time, every day even. Jesus observes that life is emerging quietly like the fig tree’s growth *each summer*. We can open our eyes to the deep down hopefulness of life or live in despair – which means we have a choice; we **can** choose life; there is a future; we do not hope in vain.

That’s where Paul’s words come in. Like Jeremiah, and John the Baptist, and Jesus, Paul sees the future as a place of welcome, not a place to be feared. That future, he says, is nurtured by prayer and gratitude, most especially for God’s presence in the life of this small community in Thessalonika – likely no more than is gathered here today. About them, Paul says, he has great thankfulness and deep joy, both of which are built on a foundation of prayer. This is a holy adventure for them AND for us. On this journey there are some things to do: one is to let go of the brutal, end-times vision that’s really destructive of human flourishing. Another is to let go of what you can’t control in these topsy-turvy times we’re living in.

And focus on this: wait expectantly for the coming of God’s Kingdom as it does explicitly every year at Christmas – and remember that Christmas is the moment that reminds us that Christ comes to us in every moment. Every moment is a “second coming.” Every moment the realm of God becomes present for us.

Here’s the challenge – if God’s reign is present now – even in this moment – what are we to do about that fact and reality? Not sit around and do nothing! Don’t allow lethargy – or anything else! – to weigh you down. Live every day in God’s presence, prayerfully, intentionally, thoughtfully, and all will be well! Happy Advent!

