

Between the Already and the Not-Yet

The Rev. Whitney Roberson

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Church of the Redeemer

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." Jeremiah 33:14-16

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How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.

Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

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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. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

"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. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man." Luke 21:25-36

Our world is such a busy place, especially this time of year: ironic, I think, that the season of Advent, intended as a time of reflection and preparation for the great and holy Feast of Christmas has been totally obscured by preparations for a very different sort of Christmas. Today is the first Sunday of Advent and I wonder if we could recover a bit of that original intention. I wonder if you'd join with me this morning in trying a little spiritual experiment that might move us into and through this season in a special way. How 'bout if I share briefly with you my own musings in response to this morning's Advent texts and then invite us into a time of silence? You've got a blank space in

your bulletin, and I've put pencils in the pews so that, if you wish, you can jot down your own musings to carry home, perhaps, to become the beginning of your own, on-going Advent reflections. But if writing isn't your thing, not to worry; just close your eyes and use the silence to talk to your deepest self or to God in the hidden places of your heart, and your heart itself will carry these for you.

Then, after this quiet time, perhaps, we can wonder a bit together about the meaning of Advent and of today's readings....

At the earlier service, our Godly Play story explained to the children that Advent is the time when we "get ready to enter the Mystery of Christmas." "A King is coming," we told them, "but he is not the kind of King people thought was coming. This king had no army, no great house, and no riches. This king was a baby, born in a barn. This is a great mystery: the king who *was* coming, is *still* coming..."

Last week we talked about the irony and paradox of this King, and now we find ourselves in a kind of time warp, as it were, jumping from the already to the not-yet. We find ourselves in a season when past, present, and future touch and mix: the king who has come, is still coming. The One who is already present in our hearts, is still to come -- more deeply, more fully. The Reign of God on, which Jesus heralded, is yet to be fulfilled on earth. Advent is a time when we get in touch with our deepest longings for something more, for something more *true*, more *real*. We see that longing reflected in today's readings:

"The days are surely coming," proclaims the prophet Jeremiah, "when ... justice and righteousness [shall be executed] in the land..." He longed for a different sort of society, where all the leaders would be wise and caring, all the rules would be fair, and there would be meaningful work and a place for everyone.

The Apostle Paul writes to his beloved Thessalonians, "May the Lord make you abound in love for one another and for all..." He longed for a deeper wholeness within the community, hoped his people would really live the values they held and proclaimed.

And into the mind of Jesus himself, Luke puts a vision of the end time when all will be put right and God's kingdom will finally come on earth as it is in heaven. It was a vision of the Second Coming of the Son of Man, a self-referent Jesus often used. These were times of great suffering for the early church and many expected the Second Coming to happen in their lifetimes: "any minute now," as it were. They were wrong, of course, as have been the many others after them who read this vision literally and tried to pin down an exact day and hour. We can understand their longing, though, can't we? In our own day, don't we long for the same things: love in our hearts, in our

families; justice and fair dealings in our land; and the whole earth transformed and united in harmony? Yes, in Advent, we live between the already and the not-yet.

Although they may have been wrong about the imminent return of Christ, the first Christians were spot on about one thing: something New *had* happened among them, something cosmic, even. God had become human, God was becoming human, God would henceforth and forever, engage with humanity in a new, more intimate – incarnate – way. And humanity had, and could now, come close to -- indeed, *enter into* -- divine Mystery in a new way. Think about that a moment: *God* is in you; *you* are in God... I wonder: could *this* be the “second coming,” happening within us right now, all the time? And if so, what does that mean for us, as individuals and as a community? How, on earth, do we enter *this* Mystery? Or even *prepare* to enter it?

I don't know, but that's what Advent is about.

I can only suggest a place to begin: we begin, I think, with our own deep longings, because just there, is where God will meet us; it's just there, that God will move us. I wonder what it is for which *you* most deeply long? During Advent, we're invited to place our longings before God, to open up the secret places of our hearts – the yearning places, the wounded places, the empty places, even the shame-filled places– open these places to a God who wants to meet us just there, to hold us just there.

We are on all our way to Bethlehem, we tell the children. We are like Mary, who said a trembling “yes” to she-knew-not-What, except that it was of God and so, good. We are like Joseph who set aside his misgivings, trusting the guidance of a dream and staying present to a future he could not imagine. We are like the shepherds, weary with the same ‘ol, same ‘ol, and filled with longing but, then, terrified when it looks like we might get what we're longing for. And we are like the sages who followed a wild star, setting aside their business-as-usual to chase a vision, only to find an infant, lying in a feedbox.... What does it all mean: our longings, a God Who is willing to enter into them? What does it mean...?

Let's take a moment to muse in silence:

I wonder: for what do *you* most deeply long: for yourself, for those you love, for our community, for our world?

I wonder what would happen if you just lay those longings before God?

If that's hard to do, I wonder what it is that makes it hard?