

## **The Two Faces of Expectation (Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36)**

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**The First Sunday of Advent (Psalm 25:1-1-; I Thessalonians 3:9-13)**

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The feeling of expectation is a powerful thing. Maybe the coming of Christmas was an experience of intense expectation for you when you were a child. But when we grow up, our childlike anticipation comes with an added dose of adult anxiety. Expectation can force new directions or create new habits. It can keep us steady when everything else is flying off into scattered orbits. Or, it can take the form of the expectation of relief or the hope of healing. Perhaps it's simply the expectation God will intervene in your life, making a way that did not exist because of your own efforts. There are two Scriptures for us to hear this morning and so it's likely there are two faces of expectation, each scripture providing a different view of the expectation God will do something in the world.

### **Jeremiah 33:14-16 (New Revised Standard Version)**

*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."*

### **Luke 21:25-36 (New Revised Standard Version)**

*"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 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 does not 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 you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."*



There are two faces of expectation on this first Sunday of Advent. The first is a look to the past, a way of seeing backward in time to when a savior was hoped for. It is an orientation to the past in the sense that it is a recapitulation of the longing of a long-ago time when women and men of faith anticipated the coming of God's Messiah. The Hebrew prophets had a strong sense of the coming of God to save God's people. In the midst of strong oppression and suffering, there was the anticipation God would enter into human history and actively work for the freedom of Israel.

Advent also looks to the future in an attitude of expectancy over what God has yet to do in history. Consequently, we have a Sunday in the season of Advent dedicated to thinking in future tense about the coming of Christ in judgment and power and glory.

It's Advent's face toward the past we usually seek. Four Sundays are set aside for the expectation of Christ's birth and we have a wonderful Christmas Eve service that helps us center our thoughts on what the wonder of that night might have been like. We have the beautiful songbook of hymns and Christmas songs that celebrate Christ's birth. The expectation of Christ's birth is full of sweetness and grace. Even the most hardened skeptic can feel the pulse of the season and celebrate that magical night.

The first Sunday of Advent is given over to consider the world's chaos that bubbles just beneath the surface. It's like the molten core that steams and liquifies unobserved until it explodes and spills over the quiet world above. The first Sunday of Advent forces us to reflect upon that hidden chaos, the world the Redeemer was sent to enter.

Should we take these difficult prophecies as a word for the day or should we take refuge in their prophecy for the mysterious someday, but not right now? Søren Kierkegaard, said the problem is that "... life (is) understood backward ... but that it must be lived forward."<sup>1</sup>

Abraham Heschel claimed a prophet was someone who knows what time it is.<sup>2</sup> Six centuries apart, both Jeremiah and Jesus stood on the streets of Jerusalem and proclaimed to those who heard them that the city would be destroyed. The message was so disturbing both of them shed tears over their own words.

When Jesus put on the mantle of prophecy, he turned to Jeremiah for inspiration and drew upon Jeremiah's prophetic imagery in his words. These two passages, separated by six centuries

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Søren Kierkegaard, *The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard*, a selection edited and translated by Alexander Dru, London England: Oxford University Press, 1932, 1:1030/ The unedited statement is, "Philosophy is perfectly right in saying that life must be understood backward. But then one forgets the other clause – that it must be lived forward."

<sup>2</sup> Introduction to this sermon adapted from Leonard Beechy, "Reflections on the Lectionary," *Christian Century*, 11/17/09

of time and circumstance, nevertheless walk hand-in-hand seeing beyond the particulars of this world, both sensing God at work birthing something extraordinary beyond the present moment. Jeremiah's message, however, was spoken under the shadow of oppression and it's a word we have to hear as though we're dispossessed slaves living under the control of others who control every aspect of our lives.

We are people of control and advantage and don't hear this message as those of the 6<sup>th</sup> century before Christ. In fact, those who share in the power systems of the world should hear these words and tremble. People who have profited from the status quo should twitch nervously whenever apocalyptic language is used because it means a change is coming which will likely reverse the conditions for those who are oppressed.

How about this example from history? Columbia, South Carolina, Mary Chestnut's diary of March, 1865:

“Sherman marched off in solid column,  
leaving not so much as a blade of grass behind.  
A howling wilderness, land laid waste, dust and ashes.”

Her diary notes the devastation to the Old South whose glory was built upon the old plantation system where slaves from Africa tended massive acres of economically viable crops that created wealth for the slaveholders. It was no small matter, then, that Mrs. Chestnut failed to mention in her tale of devastation that the slaves were dancing in the streets.<sup>3</sup>

Hearing apocalyptic news may be more about one's position in the world and how the reversal that's coming will affect their place in the old systems. It's the passage from Luke's gospel that gives us the forward sense of judgment and expectation. So, we note there's a fierce gleam in Jesus' eye as he says these words.

Ultimately we are forced to stop and consider that both Jeremiah and Jesus were telling us life is fragile. Example: What took 20 years and 80 billion dollars to create in Afghanistan collapsed like the proverbial house of cards in just a few days.<sup>4</sup> Life is fragile.

Or consider the thousands of rioters who responded to the president's call to overthrow our government on January 6. In obedience to him rioters marched from the Ellipse to the Capitol building to break out the windows and break down the doors of our democracy in order to storm Congress and overthrow the democratic election. Where does this kind of incivility come from? Life is fragile.

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<sup>3</sup> Mary Boycut Miller Chesnut, *A Diary in Dixie*, edited by Isabella D. Martin and Myrta Lockett Avary, New York NY: D. Appleton & Co., 1905, 396, electronic edition owned by Chapel Hill NC: The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1997, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/southlit/chesnut/maryches.html>

<sup>4</sup> Willie Dwayne Francois III, "Reflections on the lectionary," *Christian Century*, November 17, 2021

Just a few years ago, I might have been one of those interpreters to suggest these prophecies of Jeremiah and Jesus were descriptive of chaos about some distant time of ultimate endings. But what if Jesus was suggesting that the chaos of the world that bubbles just under the surface is a sign of the fragility of life and that we should not fall asleep to its possibility? Listen to what he said, *“Be careful, or ... that day will close on you suddenly like a trap.”*

It is up to us to realize our world, in spite of the appearance of resilience, is more fragile than we can conceive. To that end, we should heed Jeremiah and Jesus to be cautious and vigilant.

We need to hear the sweet gentle message of the coming of a savior into the world. But we also need to hear the message to live expectantly as if Christ’s coming means something right here and now where we live faithfully on his behalf.

David Buttrick tells the story of the poor black woman deep in the bayous of Louisiana who had raised over a dozen children over the years – most of them adopted and foster children. When a newspaper reporter asked her why she had done this considering her own meager resources, she replied, *“I saw a new world coming ...”*

So, the schoolteacher says to her class, *“Now class, I am going down the hall to the principal’s office for a few minutes. I certainly hope I can trust you to act like responsible 5th graders. But just in case, I’m leaving the door open. I’ve asked the teacher across the hall to listen for trouble. I hope you will show me how responsible you are. I’m leaving now. I had better not hear a word out of you. You have work to do while I’m gone ...”*

And with that she softly leaves the room. The anticipation of her return lingers in the quiet classroom. In our hearts, we long for Jesus’ presence, for we are at our best when the Master is with us.

In our hearts, we long for Jesus’ presence, for we are at our best when the Master is with us. Build within our hearts, O God, a sense of holy expectation for Christ’s return while we stay busy quietly doing the work of God in our time. Amen.

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