

Advent and the Marking of Time

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November 28, 2021

Jeremiah 33:14-14 and Luke 21:25-36

Thanks to all of you who have, already, responded to the stewardship invitation for 2022. You can see the initial responses in the bulletin. Thank you. I hope you will pledge, if you've yet to do so. You can do so this morning – pledge cards are located in the fellowship pads. Or soon – this week. We are already hard at work on preparing a budget for this coming year, and timely pledging makes that task proceed with much greater effectiveness. Thank you again.

This is an odd day in many ways. Thanksgiving has past, though many will still travel today and others are attempting to dispatch one last helping of leftovers. Black Friday is now a week long, or more. Christmas items appeared in the stores at least by Halloween, lights are up in many homes and radio stations have already made the pivot to a constant stream of Bing Crosby's "White Christmas" and Mariah Carey's "All I Want for Christmas" with the occasional "Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer" thrown in.

We in the church are facing a kind of whiplash. We know it's not yet Christmas, and yet the cultural pressure is so intense. It's a lost cause to insist that the culture wait. Perhaps it's not worth it anyway. By that I mean that anything that brings joy, or hope, or light, right now, can't be all bad, so if that means an earlier than should be giant inflatable Olaf from "Frozen" or a steady stream of "It's a Wonderful Life" or "A Christmas Story," then so be it. We can handle that.

I do hope, however, that we don't buy into this year's narrative that supply-chain problems will "ruin" Christmas – "ruin" in air quotes. Nothing can ruin Christmas, not even the Grinch. We know that.

But I get the point. I get the point of Christmas 2021 being a season of anxiety. Consider the litany. A global climate crisis. The recent conference in Glasgow reiterated the critical element of time – that it may be too late already, but if it's

not too late we need to act big, and immediately. We wonder what we can do, and if our modest efforts – recycling, less driving – can actually make a difference.

We know the litany. Two significant verdicts handed down, in Wisconsin and Georgia, with the multidimensional factors of race and guns and national division producing a difficult alchemy.

It can seem as if the world is on fire, and now we add something called the “omicron” variant to the list. In the face of all of that, why wouldn’t we want to escape into a cup of hot Christmas chocolate or an idealized Currier and Ives portrayal of things, one long Hallmark movie, set on a continuous loop?

So count me out when it comes to criticizing those who in the culture are ready for Christmas a bit too soon and a bit too robustly.

Count me in when it comes to a deeper concern – not new in 2021 – about over-commercialization.

Count me in when it comes to befuddlement about COVID, balancing our desire to gather with gathering safely and protecting the most vulnerable among us, not to mention complying with city of Philadelphia guidelines.

But count me in also as one who has, over the years, come to value Advent more and more and more. Advent was a later addition to the Christian rhythm, long after Lent. And it is still gaining traction for some of us – this four-week season of preparation and anticipation, of waiting and hope. Advent, to me, doesn’t delay Christmas. It enhances it. It makes our readiness for the coming of the Christ child more profound, a bigger spiritual payoff.

Advent can be difficult. We read difficult biblical texts. We sing hymns in minor keys. We call attention to challenging themes while seeing the world awash in tinsel and Frosty and Rudolph.

But it is worth it.

Advent is about time, and marking time differently. Advent doesn’t mean we don’t go about our business, enjoying Christmas carols on the radio or shopping or baking or decorating. It means we do so with a deeper sense of commitment because our preparation has made us ready. It is about time – past, present and

future. That is to say, we look back, to help us to look around, to prepare us for what is coming. We rely on our tradition to help us find roots in the present so we can lean into the future, with hope.

The prophet Jeremiah, imprisoned, knows that it is about time. “The days are surely coming,” writes Jeremiah. The days are surely coming. Jeremiah then describes God’s promise to the people – a people facing exile, struggling politically and economically and spiritually. They need a word of hope in the face of all they are facing. Hold on, wait, hang in there, they are told. And then the prophet reiterates God’s promise, a righteous branch, a messiah, we would say, who will come, and in that coming will bring justice and righteousness, a vision altogether different than the current scenario. Justice and righteousness.

Scott Hoezee writes that these words are “delivered by Jeremiah out of a context of suffering...and delivered also at a time when Israel was teetering on the brink of national disaster and of a period of tremendous suffering and shame and tragedy. Yet it is precisely out of this context that this message of restoration and salvation—and through that of hope—comes.”

So while I can live with a rush to Christmas, I hope we can offer hope, that is, an alternative to trite or forced cheer, or attempts to mask over the real struggle that people you and I know and love are facing and that we face together.

Of Jeremiah, Hoezee writes that “even in the midst of life’s worst woes, even in a time of collapsing securities and the disorientation that always results, God has a word. God has a plan. God has a gracious set of promises that he will fulfill. Destitution does not have the last word. The tragedies that come do not define us ultimately. God’s ways will not be thwarted by a bad economy, by unemployment, by disease, by outright poverty, or even by death itself.”

Advent is about time. In Luke’s gospel, Jesus shares a vision. We are not sure what to do with it, we rational 21st century people of faith. Unlike Jeremiah, whose coming days will be filled with justice and righteousness, Jesus’ coming days are a little less rosy. Yet both are forward looking. “There will be signs,” Jesus says. Distress among the nations, signs in the sun and moon and sky, seas roaring. It gets worse: people will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world.

We are not sure what to do with this, although I must say that the past nearly two years had held plenty of fear and foreboding and distress.

And then Jesus tells us to be ready, to be on guard, to be alert. These days are coming, but you who know, who have been claimed by God's promises, are called to be on guard so that you will not be caught, "that the day," Jesus says, "catch you unexpectedly." It is about time. Then, but also now. Willie Dwayne Francois asks "What if the symbolism of Jesus' depiction of hopeful chaos is not about some distant time of ultimate endings? What if Jesus is snatching us out of our desire for another world by asking us to face the jarring details of this one? I see Jesus making a case about the fragility of life and the fierce need for people of faith to show up each day with stamina and courage."

Karl Barth was a preeminent theologian of the twentieth century. He taught in his native Switzerland and in the United States. Barth was a leader of a theological movement called "neo-orthodoxy," seeking to bring elements of the tradition's past, in particular how we think about Jesus and the Bible, into play in the present.

One of Barth's significant contributions can sound more abstract than it is – the introduction of two Greek words, *Chronos* and *Kairos* into our parlance. Both refer to time. Chronos, we get. Chronological time, minute by minute, day by day, year by year, unfolding with predictable regularity. We live in Chronos time. We get that. Barth wrote about Kairos time. The Greek word is not overtly theological – "A propitious moment for decision or action. The right, critical or opportune moment..." That is to say, Kairos time breaks into Chronos time. We get that as well. We are biding our time, minding our business, and something critical happens. Good or bad. A heart attack. A fight with a loved one. A walk-off home run. A random encounter that will turn into a long-term relationship. Kairos breaks into Chronos and changes everything.

Barth understood that the coming of Jesus represented the ultimate Kairos moment, the in-breaking of God into the world, God's time – both eternal and immediate, intersecting with the living of our days, the unfolding of history.

Though different in tone, both Jeremiah and Jesus pointed to a future filled with hope. What would it look like for us to understand that future as being now?

What would it look like for us to understand that, yes, we look to a better future, but that that future has already begun with the coming of Christ into the world?

That is why Advent matters. Francois writes: “There is no time to wait, staring into the sky with our hands tied behind our backs as child hunger looms, the racial wealth gap persists, and gender-based violence grows. If we leave it exclusively to Jesus, the frailty of existence on our vulnerable globe will continue to worsen. A second coming is not the answer to structural racism or the dangerous momentum of infectious disease.”

So we prepare for a birth, claiming at the same time that the birth has already happened. We wait, but our waiting is active, very active, and not passive. We anticipate, even though we experience now and already what incarnation looks like. We believe that the days are surely coming, but we live as if they are already here. Advent is about time, time marked differently, time marked – perhaps paradoxically – as both more urgent and more liberated, living with hope and trust while doubling-down on our commitment to peace and justice.

The civil rights leader and Morehouse College president Benjamin E. Mays famously composed this little poem: “I have only just a minute, / Only 60 seconds in it. . . . / Didn’t seek it, didn’t choose it. / But it’s up to me / to use it. . . . Just a tiny little minute, / but eternity is in it.”

Advent is about time – past, present and future. The world needs Advent, whether it knows it or not, and we have been given the great gift of being stewards of this season, the not-yet and the already-here, to build a firm foundation of justice and righteousness in the face of overt commercialism and the foreboding litany of crises. What we believe is what we are called to share – that God breaks into this world, now, and keeps breaking in. The days are surely coming, but, in fact, they are already here. Be ready. Be awake. Be alert. Amen.