

Drawing Near
Pastor Cynthia Lapp
Advent 1, Nov. 29, 2009

Jeremiah 33:14-16
Luke 21: 25-36
I Thess. 3:9-13
Psalm 25: 1-10

For many of us, today is the fourth day of Thanksgiving and feasting on leftovers. But going by the liturgical calendar and not the gustatory calendar, it is the first day of the year, day one of Advent. It is the time when, instead of eating until we burst, we look for Christ bursting into our world, in miniature and oversized ways.

Like our banner illustrates this morning, we in the Northern Hemisphere think about Advent as a time when the light bursts through the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it. We are approaching the darkest time of the year so this light of Jesus is an important symbol for us. We will not always live in darkness, God's light has come and will shine.

Here in the north, Jesus being born as the light of the world makes sense, Christmas being four days after the longest night of the year. But how is Advent understood at the equator, where there are 12 hours of light and 12 hours of darkness, every day, year round? Or what about in the south where this is the brightest time of the year, where the days are long and the nights are short? What significance does this symbol have, the light of Christ coming into the world, when the days are 18 hours long?

I emailed my friend Coralie Ling, a pastor in Melbourne, Australia, with this question. Coralie acknowledged that they sometimes use other imagery during Advent. (Not only the holly and the ivy, if they can find them, but bougainvillea, bark of eucalypt and gum nuts are used as symbols.)

In Melbourne, on the southwest coast of Australia, this is the hot, dry time of the year. Along with the heat and arid air come dangerous wild fires. So light, fire and warmth are not the same comfort during Advent in Melbourne as they are in Maryland. Realizing this, Coralie's community has used a "watery" Advent wreath instead of a wreath with candles.

Each Sunday of Advent they pour water into a beautiful glass. It reminds them that Jesus walked on the water, Christ calmed the sea, Jesus turned water to wine, Jesus cried tears for his friend, thirsty Jesus asked a woman for a drink of water. Along the Pacific Ocean in Australia, Christ is the living water, not only the light of the world.

This year during Advent as we watch for signs of God bursting into our world, let's remember that God breaks through to us in many ways, not just in light, but in water and even air and earth.

The gospel passage from Luke 21 is quite graphic about how God bursts in. We read the milder part this morning, but in earlier verses from Luke 21 there are descriptions of earthquakes, plagues and famine. The anticipated devastation and destruction are frightening. Indeed, we read people will die from fear and get drunk to forget the realities of this world.

The tribulation we read about today in verses 25-26 sounds almost like the beginning, as “In the beginning.” Sun, moon and stars, earth, waves and seas. It is days one to four of creation all over again. The heavens, the earth and waters. Luke’s description seems scary, but perhaps Luke is describing the new creation bursting forth though it doesn’t sound as peaceful and “good” as recorded in Genesis the first time around.

Just as with Advent in Maryland and Melbourne, our location and life experience make a difference in how we read this text.

Some people read passages like Luke 21 as a future description of the “end times,” the beginning of the end of the world. The world as it is now is not to be trusted so they prepare for the end: several years’ worth of canned food in the basement. Blankets that turn into tents, growing their own food, living “off the grid.” (We should all be so concerned, eh?)

Some readers of scripture — perhaps those of us who live a more cushy life — recall that the writer of Luke was talking about his own time and experience: the tragic fall of the temple, the trials the early church endured as it was developing under Roman rule. It is not so much a description of the future as the past.

One who struggles with mental illness might read passages such as this one as a description of the inner turmoil that comes when living with depression, bi-polar disorder, anxiety or other debilitating illnesses that torment individuals and their families.

Whether an inner or an outer occurrence, if one lives with this kind of uproar regularly, perhaps it is not the terror in this passage that catches one's attention so much as the instruction to "lift up your head because your ransom is near." Redemption is drawing near. God's liberation is in the vicinity, look for it.

If this is all too overwhelming, Jesus gives the disciples a gentle parable about the fig tree. He says, "You know the signs in nature. Watch in the same way for the reign of God." If Jesus was talking to us, he might use a maple tree. In late winter we can see the small red buds on the naked limbs. We know that soon those red spots will give way to small green blooms that will drop heavy pollen and clog our gutters and sinuses. We will recover and the leaves will bloom with little seedpod helicopters floating on the breeze and before we know it, summer arrives. Even we city dwellers know how to read a few seasonal signs in nature.

Jesus says we need to become as well acquainted with the signs of the reign of God as we are with the way trees grow. When we see those familiar signs of the reign of God, we are instructed to stand up straight and raise our heads because redemption — liberation — is near.

This past week we went to the family farm near Charlottesville, Va., for Thanksgiving. My mother's family has owned the farm for almost 60 years. (In fact, they moved onto the farm about the same time this congregation started.) For many years it was a working farm with cows, chickens and turkeys.

My Aunt Rhoda, who now lives on the farm, told us a turkey story. Grandpa had 626 turkeys that were just about ready for market. They were

outside, living the free-range life, when a terrible storm rolled in over the mountains. I imagine there was thunder and lightening, the ground shook. (The signs were all around them in the air and sky.) It rained and rained. And the turkeys being the curious animals that they are, and dumb, did not move to the shelter of the turkey house. They raised their heads to see what all the uproar was about. And they kept looking and looking and looking until their “noses” got full of water and they all drowned. This was a huge financial loss for my grandparents and their seven children — one more loss in a string of financial setbacks for the family.

This story has taken on mythic proportions in the family over the years, so much so that now we know that there were exactly 626 turkeys. As my aunt told the story to my children, all I could think about were those turkeys, all standing in the rain, lifting their heads, awaiting their “redemption.” Maybe it is better to die of drowning, all together in a flock, than to be taken to market.

What about us turkeys? Jesus said when we see the signs in nature, when others faint or even die in dread, we are not to fear but to lift our heads and see our redemption drawing near.

There are Christians that make it their habit to keep their heads in the air, looking for signs all the time. They seek and pontificate, sure that each tsunami, earthquake or flood is the one that will bring the end and with that redemption **from** this world. They are following the instructions we read in Luke. But with their heads in the air, watching for signs and redemption, they miss all the people

around them who are drowning, those who could use a lifeboat or a helping hand as the waters rise.

What would happen if like the turkeys, we looked up but unlike the turkeys we also *looked around*? What if we looked for redemption not only above but below and behind? What if we stayed alert to the possibilities for how we can be part of salvation/ liberation, as it draws near? We are after all part of the Genesis creation. We might be part of the new creation as well.

Watching and waiting for redemption, even through times of war and persecution, is part of the Jewish Jesus story. Jeremiah spoke, hundreds of years before Jesus was born, describing destruction but promising also that blessings were on the horizon. At the most desperate points along the way, the prophets, in every generation, hold out hope to God's people. *God's covenant cannot be broken. Look for your redemption drawing near.*

Yet when we hear this sometimes we, or at least I, hardly know how to respond. Look for a prophet who will bring justice and integrity? Live in a land called "Yahweh is our justice?" It sounds too good to be true. And besides my life is already comfortable, easy even. Is this message for me?

If this message doesn't make that much sense in our context, it does ring true for communities like our sister church, Remanso de Paz. Adelina and Jasper pastor a congregation in exile in Sincelejo, Colombia. I imagine Luke's description of destruction is all too real for them. Prison, persecution and death are unfortunately part of life for Jesus' followers in Colombia. The message of the

prophets with the hopeful instruction to “lift up your heads and look for redemption” has real relevance.

As pastors, Jasper and Adelina help their congregation keep watch for the places and occasions when God is bursting through in their life together. From the letters we recently received from them, they do see God at work. In their letters and through Ricardo Esquivia two weeks ago, they invite us to be part of that work with them. Talk with Lauren Good, Mark Nord or Eric Olson for more information about how you can become involved with the sister church group as we seek ways to work together for peace in Colombia.

Looking up (for redemption) and around (at the world) at the same time takes practice. Jeremiah said, “The days are surely coming.” In order to believe this the people had to recite and practice those words and the accompanying actions. Our sister church is a good model for us in this. They are living out hope when many would say there is not much reason to hope.

Closer to home there are practical ways to practice saying and acting out Jeremiah’s words. “The days are surely coming.” “Yahweh is our justice.”

If you are drawn to a modern prophet’s dream, you can practice relating across the racial divide that still exists in this country. Dawn Longenecker has been intentionally practicing this for years and invites others to join her. Can we stretch our imaginations and hearts to bring a little piece of racial reconciliation and redemption to the congregation here at Hyattsville Mennonite? If you are curious or feel a tug toward this kind of work and practice, I invite you to speak with Dawn.

There are spiritual ways to practice as well. The instruction in Luke to avoid bloating ourselves with indulgence comes to mind. You would think that moderate as we Mennonites are we would not fall prey to this. But the writer says “don’t let your spirits become bloated with indulgence, drunkenness and worldly cares.”

A bloated spirit? Worldly cares? Perhaps a bloated spirit is filling our lives so full with worldly cares that we miss the fact that *God cares for us*. We are so busy taking care of others that we don’t have time to *receive care and love* from our families, friends, God. We are spread so thin that we can’t go deeper, only wider. “Be on your guard lest your spirits become bloated.”

During Advent, let us be alert to the ways that God is bursting into the world. That might mean more practice at seeking signs of redemption, being part of the new creation as it draws near. Or God’s light may shine a little brighter with one less committee in your life giving you time to go deeper in relationships with other people and God.

Let us work for justice, seek redemption and deepen our awareness of the Spirit, all the while praying for strength to endure.

“The days are surely coming.”

“Raise your head, for your deliverance is drawing near.”