

**“We Light One Candle: Hope”**  
**Advent 1C**  
**The Congregational Church of Hollis**  
**Sunday, 29 November, 2015**  
**Jeremiah 33:14-16**  
**Luke 21:25-36**

How did your Thanks-giving go this past week? Did you pay attention, and try to counter the fearful thoughts, the anxious ideas, the notions of doubt and scarcity that came to you (as they do to all of us), with expressions of gratitude?

I have to admit my week was pretty busy on the Thanks-finding front. Which is to say, I discovered just how many anxious, fear-filled, and doubtful thoughts invade and clutter my mind in a given week!

The challenge I issued to all of us (including myself) was to pay attention for any impulses of worry, and to respond to each one with at least two things for which to be grateful. I was a little taken aback by how often I had to bat away worrisome thoughts. But I was even more startled by the realization that sometimes, I didn't really *want* to bat them away. Have you ever felt that way? Inasmuch as the world has presented us with an abundance of doom and gloom recently, there are also shadows that lurk within us, actively dissuading us from embracing the fullness of life that God intends and extends for us.

That is where our Advent story begins. Liturgically speaking, year after year, our rituals and our story return us to the deep shadows and darkness that invade us and envelop us, threatening to consume the human spirit.

Here in the northern hemisphere, we're aided by palpable reminders of our spiritual experience, as the fingers of night creep quietly but steadily into our daylight, arriving earlier each afternoon and lingering longer each morning: as we tilt away from the sun, the people are bathed in night. The closer we move toward our celebration of Jesus' birth, Emmanuel's arrival among us, the deeper we are plunged into our awareness of the darkness and our longing—indeed our need—for the Light of the world.

And so, we start by lighting one candle. And then another, and another, and another. This morning we honor the light of hope.

The Old Testament passage we heard from Jeremiah 33 was a message of light and hope to the Jewish people, following after some 30 chapters of doom, gloom, and woes against them. Jeremiah, the so-called “Weeping Prophet” had wailed and railed against the people for their idolatry, their self-centeredness, political corruption, and their swiftness to abandon the rules God had about taking care of the vulnerable, all so that they could pursue their own personal gain. They would be defeated and subjugated by the oppressive forces of Babylon.

You've heard of a “jeremiad”—one of those interminable speeches or literary works wherein the author bitterly laments the moral condition of society, and concludes by

predicting its ultimate demise? Well, this is *that* Jeremiah, from whence all other jeremiads derive their name.

After the litany of woes, to hear the words of assurance that God nonetheless intended to keep the divine promise to *all* of Israel—both to the northern kingdom (the house of Israel) and to the southern kingdom (the house of Judah), which had split after King David’s death—to send a Savior to this broken, shattered people: well, it was like a candle being lit in the dark.

Several centuries later, the people of Israel were still—that is to say, yet again—under the heel of an oppressive government. This time, it was the Romans. Unlike the geographic specificity of Jeremiah’s forecast, Jesus’ prophecy was thoroughly cosmic in nature. It had to do with the judgment and transformation not only of Israel’s condition, but that of the entire world: “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars,” Jesus says, “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.” (Luke 21:25-28)

This is apocalyptic speech—language about the end of time, the apocalypse, the ultimate moment of judgment and destruction (or redemption) of the world. It’s similar to the language used by the prophet Daniel, and in the Book of Revelation. Apocalyptic language can be very confusing to make sense of, especially if we try to take it literally—although there are plenty of Christian believers who do. This is one of those passages I’m convinced we do best to take very seriously—seriously enough to suspend the need for a hard-and-fast literal interpretation, which may have us watching the skies for an event that would defy every aspect of our 21<sup>st</sup>-century understanding of the universe, and missing the most important point of what Jesus was trying to communicate.

The Biblical scholar Diane Bergant writes, “Metaphorical images like the moon and stars falling out of the sky portray the end of one age and the birth of another. Apocalyptic imagery frequently is employed in describing the entrance of God onto the stage of world history.”

When I tell you that the winged sun was a symbol associated with divinity, royalty and power in the Ancient Near East—and that the moon and the stars represented the empire’s client kings clustered around it—you can better understand what Jesus was suggesting in Luke’s gospel: It’s a sort of “code” referring to the shaking up of the earthly principalities and powers—many of which, even in Jesus’ day, self-identified as deities. But the point not to miss is this: God is not absent; God is definitely a player on this stage—whether seen, or recognized, or not.

One of the features of apocalyptic imagery is the desperation, the urgency of our perceived need for radical change—but it simultaneously paints a vivid, often frightening picture of the pain and anxiety that will accompany that change. And the change is always just about to happen, any moment now. Which is why we need to be ready, alert.

Much has changed in the ways that we comprehend the structure of the cosmos, let alone the earthly principalities and powers. We no longer take the world to be flat, or the universe as having three tiers, with heaven above the dome of the sky and hell somewhere deep beneath the earth. Furthermore, although some of them might *wish* that the nations they govern would view them as divine, I doubt that most educated people in the world today think of their leaders as gods.

But there are at least three things that haven't changed: 1) In every generation, there have been significant new threats perceived to our way of being—not only nationally, but also personally, or in our closest community; 2) Some members of every generation have thought that the threat besetting them was the one that would/will, or should, finally bring on the end of the world; and 3) In every generation, human beings have always sought and discovered ways of numbing the pain, easing the trauma of the inchoate but perceived threat to our existence. Drunkenness, drug use, dissipation—escapes into all sorts of sensual pleasures that take our minds off the worrisome thoughts—this was around in Jesus' day and Jeremiah's day, too, as evidenced by Jesus' warning against them because they dull our senses and our readiness to receive and participate in the kingdom of God when it arrives.

The distress that accompanies any major natural, social, or personal upheaval is real. The things that threaten to undo our sense of order, or selfhood, to somehow return us to a primordial experience of chaos, these things can shake us to our foundations, dismay us, and—spiritually, if not physically—scare us to death.

And that's why Luke tells us that Jesus pointed to the fig tree and told that parable, saying: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; <sup>30</sup>as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. <sup>31</sup>So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near." (Luke 21:29-31)

'Despite all appearances in the dead of winter,' Jesus is saying, 'these trees sprout leaves every springtime. And those sprouts are an indication of the fruit that will follow, come summer. You can be equally confident that just when the world seems to be falling apart all around you, that the kingdom of God is near.'

God loves this world; God has not and will not, indeed *cannot*, abandon it—not even for a moment. This is the hope and the promise of Advent: that Emmanuel has come to us, that God *is* with us.

Fear and foreboding *have* fallen over our world these past weeks and months. The cacophony of voices can be confusing and overwhelming: some sounding sensible but drowned out, others sounding shrill but oddly compelling; wailing, weeping, mourning, threatening, posturing, consoling with false assurances of safety if only we keep certain evil people away.

Our fear flits from one group to another, from one issue to another—refugees, the economy, politicians, social maladies, terrorists, rising sea levels—our anxious minds desperately trying to settle on who or what is the true Enemy, who or what are the Agents

of Death, the evil ones in our lives and in the world.<sup>1</sup> We watch with horror, we listen with mounting dread, and our anxiety is stoked as we try to figure out which voice to tune in to most closely. As we hunker down, we may not notice the darkness enfolding us, invading even our God-shaped spaces.

Here is the voice we must search out and heed, if our faith is to find strength, and our souls the reassurance they need: “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,” Jesus said. “People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. . . . Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” (Luke 21:25-28)

Advent is where our faith narrative begins each year. We start by acknowledging the gathering darkness: the darkness around us, and the darkness within. But that is only the beginning, because through Jesus Christ we know that that God has come, will come among us, to dwell with us, to be our Peace, and our redemption—from the depths of darkness that frighten us, from within the terrors that threaten to kill us.

Advent is the season when we’re called to be alert; when we watch and we wait, we prepare to embrace the holy light that will shine in the darkness, and the darkness shall never overcome it. As surely as the buds come to the fig tree each year, we know that God’s light and life are coming to us, despite all outward appearances. We do not put our faith in the people or powers of this world; our confidence is in the true and abiding Presence who grants us respite from Fear.

And that is why, as we watch and wait for the source of our faith and confidence, we light one candle. We set a flame against the darkness. This week, that candle is the light of hope. May you carry its light forward from this place and make it visible in the world outside these doors. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy Rockwell, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/biteintheapple/fear-and-foreboding-advent-1/>