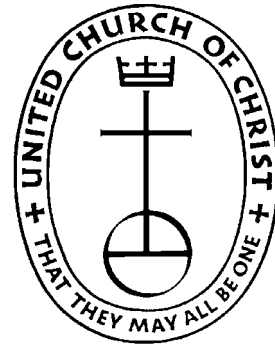


Twilight Time

A Sermon By —
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The in-between time of Advent calls to us; it woos us, with its cool colors and slowed-down tempo, to breathe, to pause, and to shake off the doldrums. It invites us to see that even with all of our troubles, even with all of our pain and disappointment, this moment, too, is God-breathed. God, the mystery of life, God, the mystery of love, God, the ground of our being, is with us, today, here, now.

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

*A Liberal Church, Welcoming of All,
Passionately Committed to Social Justice*
241 Cedar Avenue, Long Beach, California

Twilight Time Jeremiah 33 and Luke 21

I want to start today with three very short and seemingly disconnected comments. Next. Both/and. And twilight.

First. A couple of weeks ago, Tim Bolton reminded me of something I shared with you a while back. It was the joy of being “next.” Some years ago, I watched a comedian do a whole routine about being next. He talked about the frustration that we all share when waiting in a long line – think of the bank, or the check-in counter at the airport. You’ve waited all this time, and then, suddenly, you’re *next*. It feels so good to be next, you might even allow some of the people behind you in line to go ahead of you, so that you can still be next. While the comedian was playing this for laughs, there is something deeply gratifying about being next.

Second. In our Sunday morning adult education class, Cathy Clay does a fine job of reminding us that many of the bifurcations we set up in our thinking or our choices may be false. Not everything is either/or. For instance, our responsibilities to others, as people of faith, are those responsibilities primarily individual or are they corporate? Well, maybe the answer to this – and to nearly everything is NOT as simple as either/or. Maybe it’s both/and.

Third. My favorite time to watch the sky is at dusk. Sometimes the sun can be seen as it begins to dip below the horizon, and there is a glow that is orange and blue and magnificent. The sky holds *both* the light of the day *and* promise of the coming darkness. The silhouette of trees against this sky is sharp and clear, and the very first stars are just beginning to twinkle. Twilight. The Celtics called twilight “the time between the times,” the enchanted moments when the veil between this world and the next, between this ordinary moment and sacred beyond is very thin, and we can just get a glimpse of it.

I think that all of these things, being next, living in the tension of both/and, and that twilight sense of being on the cusp are wonderful descriptors of Advent. We North American Christians have really gotten confused about Advent. We’ve got it all mixed up with Christmas. We can’t help it – in our culture, we jump right from Thanksgiving to Christmas, with parties, shopping, decorations and music all around us. Christmas is happy and joyous and filled with good cheer, and we want to be there, feeling good and celebrating. Why would we want to put that off and be all serious and sing songs in a minor key? But that’s what Advent calls us to. And for good reason.

In the liturgical year, the seasons of the church year serve to create a rhythm for our communal life, perhaps even metaphors for how we live. Christmas and Easter are the big, celebratory seasons. But before each of these holidays is a time for quiet, reflection and preparation. In the ancient church, Easter, the celebration of the resurrection, was the first holiday that was established. In the earliest years of the church, people were baptized only on Easter. Prior to baptism, they had a period of time for study, prayer, fasting and preparation, and that time became the season of Lent. Later, once the celebration of Christmas became a part of the church's experience, a time for study, prayer and preparation for Christmas was developed, and that season is Advent. It's the very beginning of the church year.

In the church calendar, the season that has just ended, the last of the year, is called Ordinary Time. Ordinary Time is all of the time between Pentecost, which was way last spring, and today, the first of Advent. Ordinary Time is where we live; it's where we spend half of our time, plodding along, heads down, doing our jobs, getting through the day. Ordinary Time is when tough realities can weigh us down and crush our spirits. And then comes Advent, that twilight time, the end of a long day and before the restful night, the time when we begin to turn our faces from everything that has been, and begin to catch the hint of everything that can be.

In the lectionary, the biblical passages that are assigned to each Sunday of the year, the texts that go with Advent reflect this awareness of what might be and call us to be mindful of it. These texts are saying that the world, as we know, is about to change. Their message is "wake up, pay attention, get ready." Nowhere in any of Advent texts will you find babies or shepherds or stars or lullabies. Those are Christmas stories. Advent is altogether different.

I want to share two Advent texts with you this morning. The first is from the book of Luke, one of the gospel stories of Jesus. Luke was written some fifty years after Jesus' death, in the years following the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. The writer places on the lips of Jesus these words of watchfulness:

Signs will appear in the sun, the moon and the stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish, distraught at the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will die in fright in anticipation of what is coming upon the earth.

And he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree, or any other tree. You'll see when they're budding, and know that summer is near. In the same way, when you see all these things happening, and you'll know that the reign of God is near. Be on your guard, lest your spirits become bloated with indulgence, drunkenness and the worries of this life."

What strange words! Signs in the sky and bloated spirits! But maybe we need something jarring to lift us out of our complacency and wake up to something new. Pat de Jong, the senior minister at the Berkeley United Church of Christ has written, "The Advent texts jolt us out of Ordinary Time with the invasive news that it's time to think about fresh possibilities for deliverance and human wholeness."

The second text is from the book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah was one of the prophets of Judah; he lived in the sixth century before the common era, during the time that Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians. With the invading army literally at the gates, Jeremiah gave the people words of comfort, claiming that even in as the walls of the city were falling around them, and the people were being carted off to exile in Babylon, God was making a promise of deliverance. Here are some verses from the 33rd chapter of Jeremiah:

Thus says our God: you say of this place, 'it lies in ruins, lacking both people and animals throughout the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem. All of it is a wasteland inhabited by neither people nor animals.' Yet in this place there will be heard once more the sounds of joy and gladness, the voices of the bride and bridegroom.

In this place and in all its towns, now ruined and sheltering neither people nor animals, once again there will be pastures for the shepherds to rest their flocks. In the places surrounding Jerusalem, and in the towns of Judah, flocks will once again pass under the hand of the shepherd who counts them.

The days are surely coming, says our God, when I will bestow on my people all the blessing I promised them. In those days Judah will be safe and Jerusalem will be secure. They will call the land, "God is our justice."

The words of the gospel can be simply paraphrased: "Pay attention! Shake off all that stuff that is holding you down. Something new is about to happen." The words of the prophet can be simply paraphrased: "Even in the midst of this mess, God is present." And that's the message of Advent. Advent is living in twilight time, the end of a long and hard season of Ordinary Time, and before the Christmas star rises in the sky. It's living in the tension between the worst of times and the best of times. And perhaps most importantly, it's realizing that the worst of times and the best of times just might be the same thing.

Advent is both/and, it's living with being next, awake to, ready for, eyes opened to all of the blessings that life has to offer. As the Celts said, the veil is thin, and standing on our tippy-toes and holding our breath, we can just barely comprehend that all that have and all that we are and all that will be are contained in this holy moment.

What sense did it make for Jeremiah to call out to folks being hauled away that their destroyed home would one day again be a place of peace and plenty? Those words are a gift of hope, a promise of blessing. They promise that despite all the present difficulties, despite all the tragedies, God's love, God's presence is with us, around us, binding us together into community, bathing us in grace. God's love is more powerful than the fears that drag us down, stronger than the disappointments that invade our living.

What sense did it make for the writer of the gospel of Luke to have Jesus say, "Be on your guard, lest your spirits be bloated with the worries of this life"? Those words remind us to keep an awareness of the sacredness of our lives and not to be so entrenched in the mundane junk that governs our lives that we miss the miracle of God's presence and grace all around us.

But, oh my gosh, that's not such an easy lesson to learn. Life is short and life is hard. We are weighted down by the stuff, and when we are in the midst of it, it doesn't seem mundane. It seems overwhelming.

We all experience it, in our own ways. This year has been hard, financially, on nearly all of us, and some have experienced that more harshly than others. Some among us have lost jobs; some are facing the prospect of losing homes. We're pretty sure that things will turn around and there will be some economic recovery. But what about today?

Some of us are living in the aftermath of a relationship or marriage that has ended. We're maybe wondering now what our place is in the world, no longer sure of our footing. We're pretty sure that in time our hearts will heal and that we'll find our way into a new way of being, perhaps even be in love once again. But what about today?

Some of us are caring for aging parents, and we hold the tension of wanting their suffering to be over and borrowing the grief we know we will experience when they are gone and the physical and financial challenges of assisting them in their journeys. We trust that in time, our memories will bring a sweet peace, but what about today?

Some of us are raising children, and we struggle to keep them safe while letting them learn to navigate the world on their own. Our hearts break with every disappointment or injury they face. We juggle schedules, are so busy that the days are a blur, and long for just a few minutes of peace and quiet. We know that the day will

come when these harried days and sometimes sleepless nights will be sweet memories, but what about today?

Advent calls to us; it woos us, with its cool colors and slowed-down tempo, to breathe, to pause, and to shake off the doldrums. It invites us to see that even with all of our troubles, even with all of our pain and disappointment, this moment, too, is God-breathed. The grace that is coming and the grace that is now are the same thing. God, the mystery of life, God, the mystery of love, God, the ground of our being, is with us, today, here, now – our Advent task is to see it, to open our hearts to it, and to step into it.

Several years ago I included in an Advent sermon a part of a letter written by a fifteenth-century Italian writer. Friar Giovanni Giocondo wrote these words to a friend in a Christmas letter, and I include them again, here:

“There is nothing I can give you which you have not got; but there is much, very much, that, while I cannot give it, you can take. No Heaven can come to us unless our hearts find rest in it to-day. Take Heaven!

No peace lies in the future which is not hidden in this present little instant. Take peace!

The gloom of the world is but a shadow. Behind it, yet within our reach, is joy. There is radiance and glory in the darkness, could we but see; and to see, we have only to look. I beseech you to look.

Life is so generous a giver, but we, judging its gifts by their covering, cast them away as ugly or heavy or hard. Remove the covering, and you will find beneath it a living splendour, woven of love, by wisdom, with power. Welcome it, grasp it, and you touch the Angel’s hand that brings it to you. Everything we call a trial, a sorrow, or a duty: believe me, that angel’s hand is there; the gift is there, and the wonder of an overshadowing Presence. Our joys, too: be not content with them as joys, they too conceal diviner gifts.

Life is so full of meaning and of purpose, so full of beauty—beneath its covering—that you will find that earth but cloaks your heaven. Courage, then to claim it: that is all! But courage you have; and the knowledge that we are pilgrims together, wending through unknown country, home.

This Advent, I invite you to pause, and step into the mystery of life and the grace of God which surrounds us and holds us in every moment of our living. Amen.