

Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL
December 2, 2012
Sermon by Rev. Dr. Gloria G. Hopewell

"Time After Time"
Texts – Jeremiah 33: Luke 21: 25-36

“Lo, he comes with clouds descending...” This is surely my favorite Advent hymn, though normally I have some trouble getting my arms around this end-times imagery. Still, it is a potent reminder to us of the depth of the Advent season. That it is not just a time of waiting for Christmas and the birth of the babe. That is a past event, one worthy of celebration, to be sure. But it is not the whole story.

Those of us who care about Advent face a challenge. We swim against the tide of our culture, often making little headway. John Buchanan, editor/publisher of *The Christian Century* and senior pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, writes about the unexpected difference visitors to Fourth Pres find between Michigan Avenue's glitter and noise that are right outside the church and what is inside – the austerity of the sanctuary decorated in its Advent purples and the more somber sound of the Advent hymns. Even the regular parishioners don't understand why they are not singing Christmas carols.

Of course, if Christmas is only a consumer-driven excuse to celebrate, or a generic observance of goodwill and gift giving when people act like they should be acting all year, or even just a remembrance of an ancient event that brought a message of joy and peace, jumping right into the Christmas carols and lights and trees is probably appropriate.

The thing is, Advent refuses to color within the lines – refuses to settle for a practice that holds an inadequate vision of hope. And as strange and frightening the images in today's readings might be, they are about hope. Really.

First, Advent is the first season of our church year – our liturgical year--a way of ordering time that goes beyond the schedules we make so that we can keep our obligations. The liturgical calendar sets the year within a framework of Christian history:

- Advent: preparation for the Incarnation, the coming of Jesus
- Christmas: the birth narratives
- Epiphany: the coming of the magi, Jesus' baptism, and the beginning of his ministry
- Lent: the latter part of Jesus' ministry, his crucifixion and death
- Easter/tide: Jesus' resurrection, and the preparation of the disciples to take on his ministry
- Pentecost: the filling of the community with the Holy Spirit and the sending out to build the church; Season – Jesus' ministry

Then the circle begins once again with Advent. The problem is, if we left it at that, a big important piece would be missing. We would be left hanging with a history that is complete as is. I, for one, hope it is not – that this broken, hurting world we live in is not the peak of creation!

No, we must move beyond human history into God's time by considering the promise of the coming of God's Realm – the promise that God is still at work in the world; that it is not finished – God's purpose has not yet been fulfilled. This is what Advent does, opening as it does not with birth stories or angels or shepherds but with jarring images of cataclysmic disasters, fear and confusion, and "the Son of Man coming in a cloud." Not exactly what we are expecting or waiting to hear! But it is exactly what we need to hear for we know by now that humanity is not just going to grow and improve all by itself.

The words and images of the first Sunday of Advent are hard to understand, rooted as they are in ancient Hebrew prophets' protests against unfaithfulness and injustice. These words and images have, of course, been used by many who emphasize the time of tribulation, judgment, and the end of the world. This tends to be a message of doom used to terrify people into conversion! It has been made to fit with all manner of catastrophes through the ages and into our current events. In doing so, it misses important nuances.

The prophet Jeremiah, preached for fifty years about the unfaithfulness of the people toward God that was going to result in destruction and exile. That came to be. But Jeremiah was not done. And God was not done. With the destruction came space for something new. Jeremiah told of hope and of promise – the branch of David that would bring a world of justice and righteousness. The Messiah. As Christians believe, Jesus the Christ.

Jesus, in Luke's gospel, just before the end of his earthly ministry with his death, announces the realm of God as good news. It is a message of hope and promise that should cause believers to stand tall with their heads raised high. Believers who should be awake to the signs of this realm.

Though it is clear that the gospel writers, and possibly Jesus, believed that the end times would come within their generation, it did not. So, it became necessary to think about this prophetic language in new ways. Some, of course, continue to believe that there will be an apocalyptic ending of the world and that all of these signs point the way. Others think that Realm has already come with Jesus. The problem there, of course, is that if we look around us, we do not see a world of love and justice and peace. We don't even see a world that seems to be moving in that direction. Quite the contrary, the last hundred years or so have given us world wars, holocausts, and the potential for nuclear annihilation. In this century, we have had acts of terror, terrible destruction from hurricanes and floods, and continuing violence, hunger, and despair in our cities.

The other possibility is that God's realm *did* begin with Jesus but has not yet come to its completion. This is what theologians talk about as the paradox of the "already/not yet." We live right now/already in God's realm that has begun, but it is not yet completed. There is much more to come before it reaches its culmination. God's time transcends history but at the same time, God's time is *within* history.

What this means is that we have a role to play in the coming of God's realm. It is a matter of waiting and expectation, of being prepared. But it is more than that. It is an active waiting. We have the opportunity to make choices about how we will live our lives. We can look around us

and despair at the violence and conflict, poverty and hunger that are realities in our world. Or we can own God's realm and begin living as if the world as we know it were coming to an end in our own lifetime. What would that look like?

Have you ever lived in a house that needed work to make it really neat? But you put it off and put it off until it was time to sell? Then when the improvements were made, you realized how much more you would have enjoyed the house had you done the work sooner? Have you known someone who had just a limited time left to live, who reordered priorities to focus on what was most important?

Living in such expectation and state of preparation would likely be a new way of living for most of us. Theologian Jürgen Moltmann has some specific ideas of what that way of living would mean¹. It would be about relationships between people – seeking out and loving others; inclusion, compassion, and justice tempered with mercy; human dignity that demands human and civil rights; and the just distribution of work and profits. It would mean extending God's realm beyond humanity to all of creation, working for ecological peace. And, it would mean reorganizing and recentering the church on God's realm. "A church that is truly awaiting Christ's coming and anticipating it through its actions attempts to 'bring liberty to the oppressed, human dignity to the humiliated and justice to people without rights.'"

By observing Advent – and the liturgical year – by ordering our time in this way, we are undertaking a spiritual practice that forms us as Christians. Such a practice is bound to change us. When our priorities are reordered, our attitudes and behavior will change, too. If enough of us change, the effect could be world-altering, bringing us ever closer to the completion of God's Realm. Yes, Advent flies in the face of culture. But, then, so does Christianity.

No, Advent is not just about awaiting the celebration of Jesus' birth. It is about the coming of Christ. One person says it is about Jesus coming in history, mystery, and majesty – history: coming into the world in the past, majesty: his return at the end of time, and mystery: coming and being present to us every time we gather at the communion table.

One last thing – the gospel reading leads us to think that this completion will be very clear, very obvious – the unmistakable signs followed by the Son of Man descending on a cloud. We might want to remember that the prophecies of the coming of the Messiah were very different from what actually happened. Many expected a triumphant takeover of Jerusalem and the establishment of a strong kingdom like that of David. Instead, in the hush of a winter's night, a helpless babe was born in a cave to a peasant couple and grew up to preach and teach and heal not the rich and powerful and influential but the least and the last and rejected. Makes me wonder. How about you?

Amen and amen.

¹ Moltmann, Jürgen, *The Coming of God*, as quoted in "Advent: A Season of Expectation and Anticipation" by Robert T. Cornelison, Pulpit.org.