

THE POSTURE OF ADVENT

Jeremiah 33:14-16

I Thessalonians 3:9-13

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If it weren't for the Christian story, there would be no Santa Claus, no "Rockin' Round the Christmas Tree," no "Feliz Navidad," no Black Friday shopping. If it weren't for the story of the incarnation, God choosing to enter the world as a human being, we wouldn't have Christmas cookies, Christmas concerts, we wouldn't have the story of Scrooge, or a lamp that looks like a woman's leg and a little boy sticking his tongue onto the frozen street lamp. We wouldn't have Jimmy Stewart and his wonderful life.

I can't help it. This time every year, I start to feel possessive of this story. This story doesn't belong to Hollywood or Target. **Christmas** is the **church's** story.

Don't get me wrong. I am not a "bah humbug" person. I like the secular celebrations of Christmas, the decorating, the music.

I just wish it wasn't so hard to celebrate Christmas and Advent at the same time. Out there, it's Christmas. You know that. In here, it's the season of Advent. The church stubbornly and persistently holds on to this season, no matter how out of place it seems.

Maybe that's the point. Our determination to keep Advent is a reminder that the church is not the same as the secular world. In here, we proclaim different values. In here, we remind ourselves that there is more to life than making money and climbing the career ladder. Life isn't about competition or winning. It's about love, and service, and giving ourselves away for causes greater than ourselves.

Jesus talked a lot about the world turning upside down, the last becoming first, the ones who usually serve being served themselves. His very arrival in the world shook

everyone's expectations. One writer calls it "the great inversion: God coming to Earth in the form of a baby; the ruler of the cosmos trapped in a squalling package of helpless flesh." (quote by Kate Bowler)

The prophet Jeremiah had an unenviable job. He was asked to be God's messenger at a time when no one really wanted to hear from God. The people were mad at God, because nothing was going the way they expected it. They've been taken captive, dragged from their land, and deprived of their Temple. They've been beaten, imprisoned, and faced death. They're angry and despairing, living in exile. To them, Jeremiah says, "Don't lose hope. God is still present. It may not seem that way right now, because you are suffering. But God is with you." How do you think you would hear these words if you were the people of Israel, kicked out of your homeland? Jeremiah says, "The time is surely coming...(God says)...the time is surely coming when I will fulfill my promise. Justice and righteousness will arrive." I'm sure that some people scoffed. "Get away from us, Jeremiah, unless you can tell us **exactly** when that's **really** going to happen." Some were cynical. But some held on to hope. They kept practicing their faith, even in a foreign land. They kept telling the stories of their ancestors and their homeland, keeping the stories alive for the next generation. They saw signs of God's faithfulness in their midst.

"The time is surely coming." What will that better day be like? Can you imagine it? Can you describe it? A day when no one has to worry about what to say at the Thanksgiving table, because there won't be political divisions so rancorous that they tear families apart. A day when **everyone** will advocate for the poor, because everyone will agree that **all** people are deserving of the basic necessities of life. A day when everyone will work together to protect the environment, acknowledging that all of creation is intricately connected.

Jeremiah calls us to imagine a better future. Imagine it in great detail. That's the first step towards working with God towards creating an alternative future. One biblical scholar says that Jeremiah calls us to **lean in** to God's promised alternative future. In waiting, she says, we place ourselves in a **posture** to partner with God in the advent of a new reality.

Hundreds of years later, in the same part of the world, the apostle Paul writes a letter to a new church community, struggling to understand how they are to live in light of the resurrection. As I was reading a commentary on our New Testament passage, I came across the very same words that the Jeremiah scholar used. This scholar says that Paul's letter calls us to live with a **posture of expectancy**. We live believing that God is at work in the world, and we want to be ready, we want to be a part of it.

On this first Sunday of Advent, as we light the candle of hope, here's a question for you. How do hopeful people look? According to these two scriptures, hopeful people lean into the future. They **expect** that something good is going to happen, because God is alive and God is at work, and God's spirit of love is just about ready to enter the world again, and we...we who bear the name already of the Christ-yet-to-be-born, the soon-to-be risen Christ...we are on our toes.

You've seen sprints and relay races. Some of you have run them. You put your feet on the blocks and your whole body leans forward. Your whole body is in a state of readiness, and anticipation. You're leaning into the future. That is a posture of hope.

On Thursday, Doug and I drove to Lakewood to pick up eight Thanksgiving meals for delivery to Afghan refugees. We met a young woman named Katie Harbaugh. Katie is a high school student. Her dad, Ken Harbaugh, is a U.S. veteran active in the work of refugee resettlement. But it was **Katie's** idea to make sure that every Afghan person who

recently arrived in Cleveland would have Thanksgiving dinner, and she made it happen for 243 people on Thursday. Our first stop was a small double house in Lakewood, where - somehow - 80 meals had been prepared. We picked up our 8, put them in the back of the car, and drove to the West Blvd. neighborhood, then to a side street. After knocking on the wrong door first, then a complicated phone call, we finally connected with our first family of five - a mom and four children. The oldest child in the home was a delightful, smart 17-year-old young woman with good English. She opened the door and invited us in. Even though we knew we had another delivery to make, we accepted her gracious offer of hospitality. A few minutes later, we were sitting on the sofa in the family's living room, and soon after that, we were drinking tea prepared by the mother who was sitting on the floor in front of us. The 17-year-old daughter is the only one in the home who speaks English. She wanted to know about us, about our professions, and we asked her about her family. We were thankful to hear that they have other relatives in Cleveland. We learned that the children are being vaccinated tomorrow and will soon begin school. They've only been in the states three months, and in Cleveland one month, but she smiled at us and said, "Cleveland people are very nice." We looked around the barely-furnished second story apartment; most of us in this congregation would call it a dingy place. And it was a gray dreary day in Cleveland on Thursday. But then we looked in the faces of the members of this family - every one of whom was smiling at us. They were so grateful to be able to offer the gift of hospitality to us; just sharing a few words and a few sips of tea was an experience of joy that became contagious. Doug and I wondered what happened to the father of the family. We wondered what it would be like to arrive here with almost nothing. And we marveled at the spirit in that home. This family is leaning into their future. They're

not looking back at what was. They're grateful for what is, and what will be, and they're choosing to live with hope.

Meeting Katie Harbaugh, a teenager with a heart for generosity; picking up meals from a small Lakewood home that had produced 80 of them; and meeting our new Afghan friends — it was all a profound lesson in the power of hope.

Paul writes, "How can we thank God enough for you, given all the joy we have because of you? May the Lord cause you to increase and enrich your love for each other and for everyone...may this love cause your hearts to be strengthened."

Friends, on this first Sunday in Advent, do we dare believe the words of the prophet Jeremiah? "The time is surely coming...". God is at work in our weary world.

So lean in to generosity, lean in to expectation, lean into imagination, lean into God; it is the posture of Advent.