

Sermon – “Confused by the Roaring”

Scripture: Jeremiah 33:14-16, Luke 21:25-36

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Our first reading comes to us from the middle of the book of Jeremiah, a prophecy of promise, restoration, and covenant given by God even as God brings judgment on Judah in the form of defeat and destruction at the hands of the Babylonian Empire. Listen now to these words from Jeremiah, Chapter 33, verses 14 through 16.

14 *The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. 15 In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. 16 In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness."* Here ends the first reading; amen.

The second reading comes from the Gospel according to Luke. Jesus here gives his own prophetic words of warning and hope. Listen for God’s Word to you in these words from Luke 21:25-36:

25 *"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. 26 People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. 27 Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. 28 Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."*

29 *Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; 30 as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. 31 So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. 32 Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. 33 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.*

34 *"Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, 35 like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. 36 Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."*

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

The title of the sermon: Confused by the Roaring

The text: *"There will be signs... and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves."* Luke 21:25

Let us pray: Lord, our God, open our ears to your Word, our hearts to your voice, and turn us all to love you and to meditate upon you in a way which makes you pleased. Amen.

“Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”¹ Signs, and distress, and confusion; fear, and power, and warnings—what a way to begin the season leading up to Christmas!

We were reminded just last week of the sovereignty of God, and here in today’s readings God’s sovereignty over all things is proclaimed with abundant clarity. Things are happening around us, things far beyond us, the stirring up of all creation, a tumult of the heavens and the earth into which the Son of Man shall arrive in power and glory. And for his arrival we are warned to be “on guard,” and “alert at all times.”

In every single year of the Revised Common Lectionary’s three-year journey through the Bible, we hear prophetic and apocalyptic scripture on the first Sunday of Advent. And every year, it barges into the room unexpectedly. It always feels as though the most natural thing would be for our lead-up to Christmas to be a joy-filled trip to Bethlehem in a one-horse, open sleigh, singing carols and laughing all the way; or perhaps one long, peaceful, silent night, sitting with shepherds in the quiet hours amid the expectations and mysteries of our coming Lord.

But no, we start our preparatory season with a loud, direct, and bewildering warning of cosmic signs and tribulations, from the mouth of a grown Jesus near the end of his life on earth. What we heard, in fact, was only a small excerpt, and in order to have any idea what is going on, we should at least briefly look at the context in which each of our passages sits.

Jeremiah was an ancient Hebrew prophet who was active at the time of the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon. A significant part of his work is devoted to telling the tale of how the people of Israel, led by their kings, went astray from following the Lord into all kinds of evils, including following other gods and even apparently child sacrifice. The text includes seemingly endlessly repetitive tales of kings doing the same wrongs again and again, and warnings of great judgment. The judgment culminates in the complete destruction of Jerusalem and their temple, and the exile of the people into the far reaches of the Babylonian empire.

But right in the middle of all of this harsh accusation and warning of judgment come several chapters in the book of Jeremiah in which the prophet suddenly changes tone. Right in the midst of the context of impending destruction and loss of everything, Jeremiah speaks of a coming restoration. Apparently before the destruction is even complete, and in the process of announcing that further punishment is coming, Jeremiah declares something else, as well. “The days are surely coming, says the LORD...in those days I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: ‘The LORD is our righteousness.’”²

Besides the fact that mixing restoration promises together with judgment is odd and intriguing, we also might note the interesting name given. “[I]t will be called: ‘The LORD is our righteousness.’” Not “the Lord has returned to us because we have become righteous,” nor “The Lord is righteous,” but “The LORD is our righteousness.” This is interesting largely from a Christian theological

¹ Luke 21:36 (New Revised Standard Version)

² Jeremiah 33:14-16 (NRSV).

perspective because it suggests the theology which later arose about Jesus, who is seen as being described by Jeremiah here. Jesus isn't with us as reward for our righteousness, but comes to us in our sin and stands in for us, and our Lord serves as our righteousness for us.

Now the second passage, where it is Jesus himself speaking, comes at the end of a long discourse begun when Jesus hears some people discussing the beauty of the temple. He responds by declaring that it all will be destroyed: "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."³ He goes on to tell them of signs, of wars, and earthquakes, of persecutions, of Jerusalem destroyed and trampled upon, and then, in the part we heard, more signs, confusion, and the arrival of the Son of Man.

The parallels between the two passages are many. Both of them, in the middle of announcing destruction to follow, also promise that God will arrive with redemption and restoration. Historically speaking, Jerusalem is, in fact, sacked, and the temple destroyed, near the time both of these prophecies were made; for the first time by the advancing Babylonians in the Sixth Century B.C., and the second time in A.D. 70, after a Jewish revolt against Roman rule. Both passages follow a similar pattern, and so do the historical events around both.

We might find that somewhat surprising, though. If we take note of the promise in the first passage from a Christian perspective, and recognize Jesus as the one described by Jeremiah who will come and "execute justice and righteousness in the land," we might find it strange that Jesus, rather than taking over the land and bringing about the rule of justice, issues his own warning about another destruction and another round of waiting for the coming rule of God. This is one of the things which made Jesus so frustrating, and to many people doubtful, as a Messiah. He claims no earthly kingship but has some other agenda, and leaves behind a world still embroiled in conflict and undergoing destruction.

Which is where we still find ourselves today. Advent does have us waiting, symbolically, for the coming of Christ as a child. Advent is really here in our liturgical calendar, however, not just as a commemorative season, but as a present-day season as well, whose remembrance of waiting for Christ's birth helps us keep before ourselves our waiting for him to come again.

The waiting isn't easy or always pleasant. We are told of distress by both scripture and experience. We are told of fear and foreboding, of great conflicts and confusion, and of an unavoidable and unpredictable end coming upon each of us. We live in the world today, trying to make sense of what we know and hear, and we are left confused by the roaring and the tumult. And in the middle of it, sometimes, we see beauty, and we experience the hint of a promise of glory and things made right. Advent finds us right here, in the thick of it all.

And thus we see that Advent mixes together a mind-boggling set of things all in a single season. Advent is a grand stew of judgment, hope, fear, waiting, worry, and glad expectation. The color of Advent, purple, marks it as a penitent season, during which we make way in ourselves for the coming of the Lord. In this season we know the sadness of loss, the anger of crying out for the state of our world, and the anticipation of the righteous kingdom to come. In our Advent candle

³ Luke 21:6 (NRSV).

flame we can see love, and promise, and we can also see the flames of destruction that tore through Jerusalem and which tear through much of what we care about in the world today.

We are warned of such bad things in today's reading from Luke, and yet we are also cautioned about what might be tempting responses: decadence and the worries of this life are not things to be caught in. These distract us, and weigh down our hearts. No, we are told, "[S]tand up and raise your heads."⁴ Not just as a command; we are given a reason, and it is a promise: "because your redemption is drawing near."⁵

We are told to... wait.

To wait, praying for strength, trusting in the ultimate fulfillment of that old promise prophesied by Jeremiah, of a day of righteous and just rule, salvation, and safety.

There is an old Near Eastern folk tale about a man who made a bet with his friends about whether he could endure standing outside by himself through an entire winter night, without a coat or anything else to keep him warm. If he succeeded, his friends would treat him to a feast. If he failed, if he gave up or cheated in any way, he would prepare a feast for them.

And so outside he went, into the bitter cold. For a while, his own confidence kept him warm enough. When it got later, and colder, he distracted himself for a time by gazing on the stars in the night sky and contemplating the beauty of the universe. But eventually, the cold bled through all his thoughts, and he found himself shivering, unable to think of anything else, and regretting his having boasted and made such a bet.

Just as he was on the point of giving up and admitting failure, he spotted, far away, in the window of a distant house, a single candle burning through the night. He thought of the warmth that flame conveyed, and he imagined the heat of fire. He imagined it warming his hands, and with that imagination he warmed his spirit, and he gazed on that candle from afar through all the remaining hours of the night, the tiny symbol of heat keeping him going until the sun rose once more.

His friends were surprised when he did not return until the morning, and he announced he had won the bet. But when he told them the tale of how the far-off candle had inspired him to persevere through the long, cold night, they said, "Aha! No, you have cheated!" They declared that no matter how small, or how far away the flame, he had used a fire to warm himself, and had lost the bet. His protests could not overcome their insistence, and so he went home to prepare a meal for them.

At the appointed hour, they arrived, and he entertained them with drink, but there was no sign of food. Every so often, he would disappear into the kitchen to tend to the meal, and then come back and announce it was not yet ready. After two hours had passed, and they were thoroughly hungry, they wondered if perhaps, even if the main course was not yet ready, they could just have one of the other dishes to ease their hunger while they waited. But no, he told them, the meal he was preparing was a grand stew, and it was all a single course, being prepared in a single pot, and so they would all have to wait.

⁴ Luke 21:28b (NRSV).

⁵ Luke 21:28c (NRSV).

After they had been waiting for three hours, in their frustration they demanded to see what was taking so long. So he took them into his kitchen, and there before them was the stew, all mixed together in a single, giant cauldron, hanging from the ceiling...and four feet under it, one, tiny candle, with its one, tiny flame.

They could not help but laugh, knowing the joke was on them, and so it was that he got his revenge for their ridiculous insistence that a single candle, inside a house a hundred or more feet away, could truly have offered him any detectable heat at all.

And here we are, with winter at hand, with our own, single, small candle which we have seen lit today. Here we are, celebrating goodness and cherishing innocence, all the while knowing that goodness and innocence in the world are often at the mercy of the coldness in people's hearts. Here we are, some of us knowing well it is the winter of our own lives.

In this part of the world, most of our trees, like the fig tree Jesus speaks of, lose their leaves in the wintertime. If someone from another world, having arrived in spring and never having seen the entire cycle of the seasons, were to see the trees all turning from green to gray, and the arrival of barren winter, it would look like the end, of everything. So does the distress and the mayhem predicted in the teachings of both Jeremiah and Jesus. And yet, both of them declare that another day is coming.

Devastating, earth-shaking events, when we encounter them, are signs of what? Of ultimate and final defeat? No, of the coming kingdom of God. The end is the sign of the new beginning; the destruction of this age is the ushering in of the next. Death—even the passing away of heaven and earth—is not something to be faced with despair, or with drunken oblivion, but with head held high and prayers for strength, because it is in passing through this that we encounter the coming of the Son of Man before whom we hope to stand.

For Christmas we will light the Christ candle, in the center of the Advent wreath, reminding us that eventually we learn the fullness of just whose flame it is who warms us. But for now, we wait...we gaze upon the one, little candle, and we let its promise of warmth keep us going, and we pray: "Lord God above, grant to us the strength to escape the time of trial, and to stand before the Son of Man. Give us the joy of expectation and assurance of your faithfulness. Keep us and preserve us, now and always; amen."