

“Looking Forward”
Jeremiah 33:14-16, Luke 21:25-36
December 2, 2018
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We are in purple today because it is the beginning of Advent. The other season of the year that we use purple is Lent. And I have to admit that I don't always get Lent. Lent is the time that we are supposed to be introspective and repentant and seeking forgiveness. And I will admit that I'm not always so good at those things. And there's lots of people that don't get Advent. Because the season of Advent is confusing for many Christians. I mean, look at us. We have the church all decorated, we have the Christmas tree out already, but it's not Christmas yet. We don't sing all those great Christmas carols yet because it's not Christmas, even though every time you turn on the radio in the month of December you are inundated with carols. And the stories we read in church during advent are not the ones that are reflected in our Christmas card or on TV specials. There's no star in the east, no wise men on their way with gifts, no singing angels, no innkeeper, no baby in a manger. Advent gives us the prophets. Advent gives us John the Baptist. At the very end of Advent we get the angel appearing to Mary to tell her what is going to happen, but that's weeks away yet.

Because I think Christmas is about looking back. It is about remembering Christmases past, remembering our childhood, remembering the magic of Christmas and trying to recreate it. And it's about remembering that Christmas two thousand years ago when the babe was born in Bethlehem. It's about looking back. But not Advent. Advent is about looking forward. But what is it looking forward to? Maybe it's not really about looking forward to Christmas Day. But it is about looking forward.

That's what Jeremiah is doing and his voice and the voices of the other Advent prophets are voices that we need to hear, especially now, especially in our time. Jeremiah speaks to his people at an especially dark and difficult time in their history. The people have been taken into captivity in Babylon, their city and their Temple have been destroyed and the future looks bleak. Can you relate? How does the future look to us today? Do you worry about the future? The latest reports about the condition of our

environment and global warming might give you pause if you were thinking more that a few years into the future. Young couples today begin to question whether or not they want to bring children into the world. Relations between countries, between religions, between races, between political parties don't seem to be improving. When you think of the future, are you hopeful? No less than Jeremiah's, our world is difficult and perilous.

But then we hear the words of Jeremiah, "The days are surely coming . . . when I will fulfill the promise . . . justice and righteousness in the land . . . live in safety." The days are coming, when it will not only be all right, but it will be everything God has promised. That's why the First Sunday of Advent is always one that point us to the future. Our text from Luke is not about the coming of Jesus as a baby in Bethlehem thousands of years ago, but it is about the coming of Jesus in the future, in our future, in our lives. Advent is about looking forward, not looking back.

Heidi Newmark is a Lutheran pastor in a very rough part of the Bronx, and she writes about Advent:

Probably the reason I love Advent so much is that it is a reflection of how I feel most of the time. I might not feel sorry during Lent, when the liturgical calendar begs repentance. I might not feel victorious, even though it is Easter morning. I might not feel full of the Spirit, even though it is Pentecost and the liturgy spins out fiery gusts of ecstasy. But during Advent I am always in sync with the season.

Advent unfailingly embraces and comprehends my reality. And what is that? I think of the Spanish word *anhelo*, or longing.

I long for the day. Do you ever say that to yourself? I do. I get Advent. Because Advent looks to the future and says, "I long for the day" at the same time we grasp on to the promise of God that "the day is surely coming." I long for the day that is surely coming when God's future will be a reality beyond the violent boastings of the ruling Babylon of the day. I long for the day that is surely coming when in God's future the poor are not sent to shelters or forced to sleep on the streets. I long for the day that is surely coming when in God's future strangers and refugees no longer have to flee their homes because of fear or violence and if any ever did, they would be welcomed as we would welcome Christ the stranger. I long for the day that is surely coming when God's future has no space for violence, when we will stop producing body bags—because there are not dead soldiers to fill them. I long for the day that

is surely coming when God's future holds no room for hatred, a day when our world is no longer torn asunder by racism and sexism and homophobia and any other made up excuse not to follow Jesus' command to love one another.

What do you long for? When you look around at the world, what makes your heart ache? When you think about your life, the lives of your children and grandchildren, what do you long for? What do you want to happen? Advent is the proclamation that our future is in good hands. Because it is in God's hands.

And of course I long for the day that this table promises. A day that does not come easily, for this table came through the sacrifice of Jesus, but through it, all people are brought together. A day is surely coming when all God's people will sit down together and feast with all the saints.

That's what Advent is about. That's why Advent looks forward and not back. Because we trust in the promises of God, that no matter how frustrated we get, no matter how dark the present seems, no matter how little hope we have in human institutions, our future is in the hands of God. It won't come easily. It will be a lot of work. But that's what we're about, that's what being the church is all about, participating in the future that God had promised.