

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. *Amen.*

On this first Sunday of Advent in our Liturgical Year C, the words we hear from the Prophet Jeremiah and from our Lord Christ may seem foreboding:

From Jeremiah: “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...”

And from the Gospel of Luke, our Lord says: “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations...People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world.”

We might have to struggle to remember that those words are ancient, passed down from times when the world was chaotic and people were frightened about what was going on around them. Spoken afresh today, they cause us to think about events in the world in our own time. Just this past week, we’ve been reminded again about the state of our world through violent incidents that have occurred in our own country, a country that values abundance and professes to trust and worship God but is divided by disagreements and prejudices. We lose sight of the fact that in our day, both here and around the world, hatred is promoted and violence is perpetrated by fanatics, by people who use religious differences to further their own agendas, and who may or may not be truly religious themselves. As these incidents become more commonplace, especially those within our country, they disrupt our civility and we become inclined to sort and categorize those who are responsible. We seem unable to understand that by grouping people together because of race or religion or gender or sexuality or any other attribute that offends us, we are feeding our fear of others and contributing to our own isolation. That is not what God intended for us, of course.

As we think of the frightening state of our world today, let’s remember that into the disorder and chaos of the Israelites’ defeat and Babylonian exile, God called the Prophet Jeremiah to speak for God. Through Jeremiah, God warned the Israelites of the fall of Jerusalem; but Jeremiah also held up to them God’s promises, as we hear today, promises of hope for people who just wanted to return to their homeland and the life they had left behind—not unlike those many refugees we’ve watched flee from their own homes in recent weeks.

We remember also from the story of Jesus’ birth, which we’ll celebrate in just a few weeks, that our Lord was born into yet another time of political unrest and oppression. And as he grew older the lessons God sent him to teach us put his own life in danger. God sent Jesus to proclaim the same promises of hope and salvation that Jeremiah and others of God’s choosing had spoken to bring comfort and assurance of God’s love and mercy to people who longed desperately to hear it. The images Jesus used to speak of God’s promises were familiar to those who heard them in his own day; these were people who had learned to watch the sun and moon and stars for signs that helped them manage their lives.

Today we hear the same message, which can be just as meaningful for us when we consider it from our own twenty-first century perspective, as it was for those who first heard it. The message isn’t meant to frighten or alarm us, but to comfort us. During this season of Advent, we’re called, just as the ancients were, to shift our focus from the bad things going on around us to the awareness of God’s loving grace and the promise we’ve heard again and again, of redemption for God’s own people. Let us not forget that *we* are God’s own people and through our belief in God’s truth and in the promises delivered by both the prophets and God’s son Jesus Christ, we are given the means to be expectant and hopeful in a time when hope and anticipation are fleeting. As Dennis Bratcher

wrote at Crivoice.org, “We are called to live in the present, yet with the expectation that in some concrete way that we cannot yet envision, God will work God’s own restoration of all things.”

Thursday evening after the Thanksgiving dishes were cleaned and baby Iris was put into her crib for the night, her parents and I watched the video of a concert featuring some of our favorite progressive Blue Grass bands. It included interesting candid conversations with some of the musicians, like Chris Thile of the Punch Brothers. Speaking of what it’s like to perform before audiences who more and more frequently have one eye on the stage and one eye on the screens of their smartphones, searching the web or checking email or text messages—something I’ve seen, by the way, during our services here at St. France, Chris Thile says we live in a time when we’re never fully present in the moment, when we almost always have one foot “out of the circle.”

The chorus from the Punch Brothers’ song “My Oh My,” speaks to that:

“My oh my, what a wonderful day
We’re having.
Why, oh why, are we looking for a way
outside it?”

The distractions of our lives draw us away from what we really need toward things that don’t necessarily inspire or fulfill us. Whether we want to admit it or not, allowing ourselves to be distracted, whether it’s during a concert or a conversation or worship service, is a choice we make—sometimes a subconscious choice, but a choice just the same. We never can and never should completely ignore what’s going on in the world around us. We should always be concerned about the injustices that threaten our wellbeing and the health of our world. Most importantly, though, we should always live our lives trusting that God is with us and anticipating, expecting that all that has been promised to us through the birth of a little child more than two thousand years ago will come to be. When we are not distracted away from it, the season of Advent does that, gives us a circle of anticipation, expectation, and hope, a perspective that is not threatened by fear and hatred.

Dr. Natalie Wigg-Stevenson, who teaches theology at Emmanuel College at the University of Toronto, writes about the journey she and her husband took on the ancient Christian pilgrimage route, the Camino de Santiago.¹ They began in France and took thirty days to walk the 850 kilometers through Spain to the tomb of St. James. She writes that as they walked, their steps became a spiritual practice; that as pilgrims on the way the time and space “that held the rest of society captive” became less apparent, less important to them. “In Santiago,” she writes, “the sky is strange. The colors swirl in mystery: clouds and winds form gorgeous, threatening patterns that dance upon and drown the city underneath. In Santiago,” she continues, “there is a sublime difference between those who have driven there and those who have walked. Only we who have walked, it seems, can see the sky for what it is.”

Today as we lit the first candle on the Advent Wreath, we asked for the blessing of Jesus Christ, coming to us to warm our hearts and brighten our way. We have prayed for God to give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. How will we receive what we have prayed for, and how will we use it? Will we walk through the journey of Advent, or will we drive? The way we meet Jesus at the end of our journey is up to us. What will we choose?

My prayer for all of us is that Advent will be for us a time of peace and faith. Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, come and dwell with us. Desire of all nations, gift to every generation, come, make your home with us. *Amen.*

¹ Synthesis, Year C, Advent 1 – Postscript, November 29, 2015.