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Advent 1 Series C 2018

Phillip L. Brandt

Concordia University - Portland, pbrandt@cu-portland.edu

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First Sunday of Advent – December 2, 2018 Series C

Is the Sunday after after Black Friday a sort of Easter? Monday will Cyber Monday. This is starting have a liturgical cast to it. These are becoming holidays/holy days. How do we incorporate the culture we live in into our worship lives without succumbing to the culture of materialism and consumerism? We dare not light the first candle this week and call it the “Walmart Candle” and then next week add the “Target Candle.” Jesus is clearly not for sale, but he is walking the malls and noticing the people in the marketplace. The culture is in full Christmas here – we need to let Advent be that. Our culture celebrates Christmas in the home, not in Church. How do we let that good thing happen? How do we bring that cultural expectation into our worship? Do we have families particularly involved in worship?

We light that first candle in the Advent wreath this Sunday. A new year and a new pericope cycle is upon us. The Gospel of Luke occupies our attention primarily this year. Its themes of Jesus’ love for little, least and lost people, its portrayal of Jesus for all humanity, its decided emphasis upon the order and reign of God will be important to what we have to say.

But this is Advent I. We light that one little candle in the darkness of December. Jesus seems far away as we do that. The light will grow. Jesus will draw nearer as the season progresses, but today we are in a dark place with one little candle lit. It feels like the darkness will overwhelm us. The news is not good which comes through the pages of our papers and the screens of our televisions and computers. The darkness seems to be winning.

The preacher will want to work that effect for his people today. We light a candle but it seems so inadequate because the darkness is so deep. Those feelings are important to the preaching of the Gospel. Don’t imagine that they are not there. Don’t come out with some bravado or false cheer in the face of adversity. The problems are real, the darkness deep, and our candle looks pitifully small.

But the candle also speaks of hope and expectation. Jesus seems far away from us sometimes. He seems to be absent from this cruel and harsh world. Our people might be wondering where he is. Let those questions be asked. Let those feelings be felt. You cannot stop them. You don’t want to stop such feelings. This may be the only time when it is OK for them to feel these feelings.

Our world is frenetically trying to cover up those feelings with a gush of consumerism and shopping. I have been struck lately as the L. L. Bean and Lands’ End catalogues have been deposited in my mailbox. The models are all beautiful people who are out in the snow laughing. I have lived in the upper Midwest. I know that this is not what winter looks like. But they are selling me an eschatological vision of sorts. If I only have the right clothes, then I can have this much fun and be this handsome/beautiful in the snow. When you stop and think about it for just a moment, you realize that this is a ridiculous lie. But Madison Avenue does not want you to stop and think about it. It wants you to buy, literally buy, into that vision. “Just get the coat!”

Jesus rides into Jerusalem in one of today’s readings. The other is set a few days later, over both of them the darkness of Jesus’ crucifixion and death hangs. This is what gives these passages their punch for the reader. If we skip to Easter too quickly we invalidate the sense of gloom and

dread which our people are feeling. But that feeling is the Advent sensibility. Advent's message is not to take that feeling away, but to speak of what God says to this benighted and broken world he made. Advent owns the brokenness and yet speaks hope.

So we light a candle, it doesn't look like much. But Jesus on the cross did not look like much either in the face of this world's cruelty and death. In fact, he looked a great deal like the very problems he had come to solve. A burning candle, after all, is just contributing a little more carbon dioxide to global warming. His death was not just. His suffering had no apparent meaning. He looked like the victim of the same dark forces which we fear. And yet, his cross is so much more.

The Advent preacher needs to restrain himself. Don't jump to Christmas. Let Advent be Advent.

Collect of the Day

Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come, that by Your protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by Your mighty deliverance; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

The folks who stood in line outside of Target at 4 AM to take advantage of the Black Friday sales were not worried about the threatening perils of their sins. They were looking for deals. The sacredness of time and space has been eroded. Now the big box stores are opening on Thursday (Thanksgiving Day!) evening to cater to the eager deal seekers. Or has another sacred dimension seized the holiday real estate and moved in? Do we worship on Thanksgiving in another temple when we hit that pre-Black Friday sale? How do we preach to that? Is family sacred here? Is Thanksgiving Day a sacred thing? What is a holiday if not a holy day? What does that mean anymore?

The early Christians used to pray, "Maranatha!" (We surmise this from I Corinthians 16.) This means, "come Lord Jesus." They expected that he would come in the Eucharistic moment, when they were gathered together around his meal/body/blood. They expected Jesus to show up every Sunday. I wonder if this sense of anticipation did not increase church attendance. It was usually worship that was outlawed in times of persecution. Christians risked their lives to come – perhaps this would be the day Jesus showed up. Of course perhaps it would be soldiers who would come to arrest and kill us. Those stalwart Christians chose to come to church anyway.

We ask the Lord to stir up power, but that is a dangerous thing to seek. Power is not grace and love. Power crushes and kills as well as saves and helps. We want God's power to rescue and protect us, but beware of what you asking here. Do you really want God to rescue you from your own sins? What if you rather like them? What if you are even fond of them? What if they are the only reality you know? Like an alcoholic who knows that the drink is killing him, we cannot give them up, they possess us as much as we possess them. Jesus and Paul use the image of slavery to sin (John 8:34; Romans 6:15-18). What if rescuing me from my sins involves purging me with

fire and pain and worse? What if to rescue me he must slay me and make me alive. In the AA narrative the alcoholic must “bottom out” before he can start to climb back up. Do I really want that God to show up in power? What if the bottom is a tomb?

There is the danger of sin, isn't it? This is why we need God's powerful love and mercy and grace to answer this prayer and save us from them. Our power is pathetically inadequate before the task of saving us from our own sinfulness. But God's intervention on our behalf may not be altogether pleasant. Having sin excised from my life may be painful. It has woven its way into every facet of my being, my relationships, my thoughts, my desires, my love, my things, everything. If you pull it out, what will be left of my life? Would there be anything left of me? The Confessions ask this question in the Formula of Concord – Article I. Is sin essential to the human being? Before you ask God to come and destroy sin you might want to ask if that is a self-destructive prayer.

It is a matter of great trust to speak this prayer and mean it. You must be praying to your Savior here.

What do we understand to be the threatening perils of our sins? Do we know the half of them? It is easy to point to the painful things which happen as a result of sin. The broken relationship, the lost job, the grey hair and the failing senses. Save us from those, yes. But does it not also speak to the much more subtle peril of our idolatry, of our covetousness, of our self-perception, and our loves as well? What if the threatening perils are the very things that I love? What are they??

- 1. High blood pressure because I eat too much and exercise too little.*
- 2. My own little world in which I am most important - Divorce is incredibly expensive.*
- 3. My payments on the toys and house for which I took out debt but now I don't have the job to support them.*
- 4. My family is in a mess because my temper/libido/greed has made a mess of them and me.*
- 5. Addictions can destroy a life.*
- 6. How does my pride make my life miserable and threaten me?*
- 7. How does my covetous nature, or my inability to rejoice at my neighbor's success and weep at his distress imperil me? Does it not suck the joy right out of my life?*

When I call Jesus “Savior” just what do I need saving from? Sin, Death, and Devil were Luther's quick answer to that. How will we put skin on that?

Readings

Jeremiah 33:14-16

¹² *“Thus says the LORD of hosts: In this place that is waste, without man or beast, and in all of its cities, there shall again be habitations of shepherds resting their flocks. ¹³ In the cities of the hill country, in the cities of the Shephelah, and in the cities of the Negeb, in the land of Benjamin, the*

places about Jerusalem, and in the cities of Judah, flocks shall again pass under the hands of the one who counts them, says the LORD.

¹⁴ “Behold, the days are coming, declares 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 dwell securely. And this is the name by which it will be called: ‘The LORD is our righteousness.’

¹⁷ “For thus says the LORD: David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel, ¹⁸ and the Levitical priests shall never lack a man in my presence to offer burnt offerings, to burn grain offerings, and to make sacrifices forever.”

I wanted to give a little context here. The people of Jesus day are often dinged for having a mis-expectation of the Messiah. But looking at the context in which Jeremiah’s words are embedded, you can see how they would have looked for a new David/Moses like character.

Jeremiah, other than the Psalms, is the longest book in the OT simply by word count. Yet it is frustrating and often not studied because it is difficult to make sense of some of this. It appears that the material was edited or somehow compiled in a fashion that one almost has to say is utterly random. The stories are not chronologically organized, and there is no thematic way to make sense of them, at least not that anyone has been able to make sense of yet.

This complexity is too bad because Jeremiah brings into the Christian discussion some really profound and amazing things. He deserves more attention.

Today Jeremiah speaks of a promise made to the houses of Israel and Judah. This is a little odd in that Jeremiah lived a full 100 years after the destruction of Samaria. There is no house of Israel to speak of. It has been utterly destroyed by the Assyrians and the northern 10 tribes of Israel are no more, except fragments like Paul who was of the house of Benjamin or Anna of the house of Asher. The ten tribes who made up Israel are gone when Jeremiah speaks these words. But God still has a promise for them. God, you see, is not limited by our sense of the possible when he makes promises. He can promise life to a dead man. He can make and keep promises to a nation of people who have been destroyed.

He will cause a righteous branch to spring up for David. Of course we hear that as Christians and immediately the Jesus button lights up in our theological brain. And properly it is so. Jesus is surely the fulfillment of this promise, a promise made to the people of Israel and Judah that through them the whole world would be blessed.

He shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. I would almost bet that the audience of Jeremiah thought that meant something pretty similar to what we do. This means things will suddenly be fair. The scoundrels will no longer be able to make off with the savings of some retiree much like the executives of Enron did with the retirements of so many or the banking tycoons who lamented their diminished bonuses while millions of folks looked for work, any

work. In this just and right land, the corporate types who ruin companies will get their expensive BMW's repossessed. The men at VW who hatched the scheme to deceive the EPA about diesel emissions from their cars may have been fired, but do you suppose that they are living in the poor house? It is the factory workers, the mechanics, the salesmen, and the rest of the people who were part of the VW Empire whose jobs and homes were at stake.

But wait, when Jesus showed up that is not what happened at all. He executed justice by dying on a cross for the sins of the whole world, including the miserable CEO's who ripped off the pensioners. When Jesus came the sinners were forgiven and justice was satisfied with his sacrifice on a cross. Being people on this side of the cross, we should be prepared to be surprised by him.

Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will dwell in safety. Does this have extra traction for us? The world seems to be in upheaval and we seem to have enemies within and without. Jeremiah wrote in a time of great economic and political upheaval. The city of Jerusalem had at this point been subjected by the Pharaoh Neco (II Kings 23:28-35) and then by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon (II Kings 24:1-7) The first son of Josiah had only ruled three months before Neco hauled him away to Egypt. The second son ruled eleven years but that was as a vassal of Babylon and then he died besieged in Jerusalem by the Babylonians.

The grandson of Josiah, Jehoiachin, only ruled three months (again) before he surrendered to the Babylonians and was hauled off to Babylon as his uncle had been taken to Egypt. Nebuchadnezzar installed another son of Josiah, an uncle of Jehoiachin, on that throne who took the name Zedekiah. It is during Zedekiah's reign that Jeremiah writes this.

Safety and security were in short supply but so were kings who actually ruled in righteousness and justice. Zedekiah was king because he was the next in line of an incredibly ancient house. The sons of David had ruled in Jerusalem for a phenomenally long time, over 400 years at this point. For a dynasty in the ancient world that was remarkable. But Jeremiah, who had been an advisor to good king Josiah, was not impressed. Zedekiah was a wicked king.

The name of this good and righteous branch of David will be "The Lord our Righteousness" Which doesn't sound too bad, except that this is exactly what "Zedekiah" means. This little passage is akin to a political cartoon of the day in which Jeremiah is skewering the current political leader, the king. God will raise up a branch who really will live up to the name that the king has chosen. It won't be a lie any more.

You can imagine this went over like a ton of bricks with the powers that be in the city of Jerusalem. Jeremiah was arrested, a plot would be hatched to kill him. God would only save him after terrible trials and tribulations, interestingly, by an African (Jer 38:7-15)

The preacher will want to ask what all this means. Christ is the king who lives up to the name. He has in his cross established righteousness and justice for an entire planet of sinners. We in fact see that every time we absolve a sinner and establish them as right and justified before God. But is that all this means? Does this not also indicate that we see something more? Advent focuses our attention on that failure to see. The righteousness which Christ worked on the cross

is frustratingly absent from our lives, both personally, congregationally and socially. We still see hungry people in a land filled with food. We still see the poor guys getting stomped on by the rich guys. We still see wars and bloodshed and famine and all sorts of things. We see terrorists shouting praise to Allah and shooting up theaters in Paris. Where is the justice and the righteousness which Jesus effected? Where is the kingdom of God? It is that plaintive cry which Advent gives us a chance to articulate and which Christmas will answer with angel song and which we will see in the many changes which have been wrought in society. Not completely done, but which have made the world a much better place. But that is a Christmas sermon, is it not?

But at Christmas we have the same problem as now, don't we? Jesus is the righteous branch, but where are the justice and the righteousness which Jeremiah also sees here? The preacher cannot be shy about preaching this, and Advent is the place to do it. Christmas did not seem to change much. The same injustices and broken world still plague us. The Herod's of the world are still slaughtering the infants. We don't have a nice and easy answer for this one. It is a hard thing. Christians don't have less pain or less suffering because of their faith. We come to Christmas with hope, but how do we deal with that hope seemingly disappointed?

Is this the very same thing that Jesus encountered when the Jewish folks of his day thought he should kick out the Romans but he did not? Is the problem with the expectation? Has Jesus in fact fulfilled this promise? How? I think we can point to Absolution and Sacrament, and yet we have to be prepared that this will not be entirely satisfying. What has materially changed about a person who attends the Lord's Supper and partakes of that meal? Has anything substantively changed about them? Not that a doctor with his MRI or CT scan will be able to tell. Yet, we proclaim that it has. What do we proclaim that is different? Is it just what God sees there? Or is there more to it than that?

Is it time to proclaim that God has arranged things this way? He has left the snakes at our feet so we need to look up to the one suspended between heaven and earth? (Numbers 21) Advent is about focusing my attention on the discomfort of the season. The "Not-Yet" of Advent is not easy or particularly comfortable. It is distressing. Christmas is the time when I speak of the "Now" the reality of what transpires in Sacrament and Absolution and Word proclaimed. That God is acting there, and that is far more important than the world I see around me. We will not shy away from or hide from the discomfort of this time. To do so is to diminish what he has done.

Where does the preacher need to be edgy on this? Jeremiah was edgy in calling the king a charlatan who did not deserve the name he took. That was edgy. Do we need to look at the shirt at Wal-Mart which is such a good deal but may have been made in that Bangladeshi factory which burned down and killed over 120 people? Do we need to question the morality of that shirt? Our culture has turned Christmas into a "need it now" sort of thing, and inexpensive means all the better, I can have it now and suffer less pain. But is this something I need to repent of? Is it something I need to change?

Psalm 25:1-10

¹ To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.

² O my God, in you I trust;

let me not be put to shame;
let not my enemies exult over me.

³ Indeed, none who wait for you shall be put to shame;
they shall be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.

⁴ Make me to know your ways, O LORD;
teach me your paths.

⁵ Lead me in your truth and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all the day long.

⁶ Remember your mercy, O LORD, and your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.

⁷ Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions;
according to your steadfast love remember me,
for the sake of your goodness, O LORD!

⁸ Good and upright is the LORD;
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.

⁹ He leads the humble in what is right,
and teaches the humble his way.

¹⁰ All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness,
for those who keep his covenant and his testimonies.

The advent preacher may want to consider this psalm as a text. Verse seven is particularly important as the psalmist pleads with God not to remember the sins of my youth. Rather he wants to be remembered in light of God's steadfast love. There is a whole sermon right there for the preaching.

I Thessalonians 3:9-13

⁶ But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and reported that you always remember us kindly and long to see us, as we long to see you—⁷ for this reason, brothers, in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith. ⁸ For now we live, if you are standing fast in the Lord. ⁹ For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, ¹⁰ as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith?

¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you, ¹² and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, ¹³ so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Acts records that Paul only spent three Sabbaths in Thessalonica preaching before the local Jews stirred up a riot and drove him out. They then pursued him to the next town and drove him out of Berea as well. Paul, concerned for his little flock in Thessalonica dispatched Timothy to check up on them. I have included the verses immediately before this so you can see what Timothy had to say to Paul about them.

It also appears that Paul wrote this letter because Timothy not only brought back a good report that this little group of Christians was still alive and well, standing firm in the face of fierce persecution, but they also had questions. You can imagine since they only had three weeks of catechism class before their teacher got driven out of town. Specifically they had some serious questions about the end of the world, questions which Paul addresses in chapters 4 and 5 of this brief letter. But before he gets there, he spends the first three chapters talking to them and preparing them to hear what he has to say. He really is addressing the question they are not asking but which lies under their question. They are afraid of the last day.

We too tend to come to the discussion of the end of the world and think that it is a terribly frightening thing. One of the drivers of that fear is that we won't measure up on that last day. Paul seems to have been writing to a group of folks in Thessalonica who shared that idea with us. He spends the first three chapters setting their hearts at ease. In chapter 1 he tells them that Jesus will rescue us from God's wrath on that day. The wrath still comes, but Jesus will rescue us. In chapter 2, Paul tells them that on the last day he will stand before Jesus and brag about them and their faith. He is just so proud of them. And finally here in chapter 3, we get the good news that God is the one who establishes their hearts as blameless in holiness before God at the coming of Jesus. This is not their work but God's work. Yes, it takes shape in their lives of love and service to one another. But that is also God at work in them.

I have my students read this little letter and ask them to find in each chapter the section on the end of the world and summarize it. There is a verse or two or more in every chapter of Thessalonians which deals with the end of the world. Then we go through them in class. It is amazing to me what happens every time. They always speak of God judging and punishing and the like. But they don't actually read the text. They import their preconceptions into the text. Look at this little piece of it in vss 11-13. Paul is not asking them to do a thing. He is not telling them that God is mad at them or that they have to measure up somehow. He is praying and expecting God to do everything here, but we always see this as a moral burden laid upon us to love one another and as soon as we see it that way we know we have failed.

But that is not what Paul is doing at all, is it? God will establish our hearts as blameless on the last day, not us. He will make us holy, that is what Paul actually says. But my students and I would guess your hearers as well are not hearing these words that way. The Advent preacher may want to preach just those words today, that is if he is ready himself to hear what Paul is saying.

Luke 19:28-40 (There is a second option for the Gospel reading which I address below)

²⁸ And when he had said these things (*parable of the minas*), he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. ²⁹ When he drew near to Bethphage and Bethany, at the mount that is called Olivet, he sent two of the disciples, ³⁰ saying, “Go into the village in front of you, where on entering you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever yet sat. Untie it and bring it here. ³¹ If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ you shall say this: ‘The Lord has need of it.’” ³² So those who were sent went away and found it just as he had told them. ³³ And as they were untying the colt, its owners said to them, “Why are you untying the colt?” ³⁴ And they said, “The Lord has need of it.” ³⁵ And they brought it to Jesus, and throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. ³⁶ And as he rode along, they spread their cloaks on the road. ³⁷ As he was drawing near—already on the way down the Mount of Olives—the whole multitude of his disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen, ³⁸ saying, “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” ³⁹ And some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples.” ⁴⁰ He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out.”

Look at the cultural view of Christmas here. Jesus comes in quietly, on his little donkey. The disciples start shouting up the event. The Pharisees want the disciples to be quiet about it all. Think about how this parallels with our situation. The disciples today want to shout out the name “Jesus.” They want to keep this Adventtide and remember who is at the center of all this frenzy of spending and festivity. But the prevailing mood of the culture is that the Christians/the disciples should be quiet about all that Jesus stuff. This is about spending for the economy.

Jesus says that if his disciples were quiet even the stones would cry out. He might have been pointing to the hearts of the Pharisees when he said that. (See Ezekiel 36:22-32.) The preacher looking out over a bunch of stoic Lutheran types might be tempted to think that he was preaching to a bunch of stony hearted Christians.

Consider also the expectation of the disciples who are calling Jesus a son of David and shouting out “Peace in heaven and glory in the highest.” They see a king coming, but are they expecting the crown of thorns or the cruciform throne on which he will rule by Friday of this Palm Sunday week? Hardly, they are looking for one who will deliver from the Romans. See the Jeremiah passage for why they might have thought this.

There is a strong theme of meekness as well. The Jesus who rode into Jerusalem on a donkey came humbly, usually depicted as riding on a donkey, on the trip to Bethlehem in Mary’s womb. Our king does not reveal himself in power, at least not yet, but reveals himself in humility and service. Where do we see him in that humility today?

The preacher who chooses this text is choosing to preach on the season of Advent. We are in a parallel with the folks who stood there waving palm fronds. They did not quite know what to expect, but they were glad to see him. Jesus would surprise them all by dying on the cross that week and we too as we wait for the coming of Christ should expect that we will be surprised by what we see.

They were basing their joy on a promise. God had said that the messiah would ride into town over that very hill, on a donkey. Here was Jesus fulfilling promise. We have also a promise that

he will appear again as the disciples saw him leave on Ascension Day. (Remember Ascension Day? We probably did not have church that day, but it was worth remembering.) They had great hope for what Jesus would do; we, likewise, have great hope for what Jesus will do. The dead shall rise, the tears shall be dried, and justice shall be served.

The preacher who opts for this text will want to establish that his hearer is really in the shoes of God's Old Testament people, waiting for the promise that Jeremiah made to be fulfilled. This is a focus on the "not yet" nature of our faith. We are a "waiting" people, patiently and not so patiently waiting for the promise of God to be fulfilled. What does it mean to be standing here with a palm frond in my hand, waiting for Jesus to come over that hill? What does it mean that I am a person defined in a sense by what I don't have yet as much as I am defined by what I do have in Christ?

or Luke 21:25-36

²⁵ "And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, ²⁶ people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷ And 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, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

²⁹ And he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. ³⁰ As soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the 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 say to you, this generation will not pass away until all has taken place. ³³ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³⁴ "But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap. ³⁵ For it will come upon all who dwell on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶ But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

³⁷ *And every day he was teaching in the temple, but at night he went out and lodged on the mount called Olivet. ³⁸ And early in the morning all the people came to him in the temple to hear him.*

Two verses really stand out in here for me: 28 and 36. We have just heard all the material in the rest of this as Mark presented it, but Luke offers us these two verses a little differently.

²⁸Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

The Christian has a strange reaction to the things that are going on in the world around us even now. When we see the great disasters and the things which cause men to be afraid, we are

supposed to stand up. When the rest of the world ducks, we put on our best suit, polish up the shoes and stand up straight.

Why? It is because we have a hope which transcends this miserable and broken world. The events, which terrorize the rest of the world, are the harbingers of the return of our master and king who loves us. We are a “waiting” people, you see. We are awaiting the reappearance of our king. He is Arthur and Barbarossa and Elijah and all those returning king and prophet types rolled into one. Those characters are but echoes and shadows of this returning king. He has passed through and conquered death itself. Every sunrise is a hopeful event for us. The glow in the east might be him. And if it is not, we are not disappointed by that. We find another day and another way to serve him.

For the waiting people of God are also waiters, serving him.

³⁶But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

Our prayers are that we may stand on that last day. We will need strength from him, for we have none of our own. We will need watchful wakeful sorts of lives to live. There is much to escape, and we will need his guidance and Spirit to pull that off. Praise God we have it! Our standing on that last day has been assured by the gift of His life on a cross.

Does the fig tree parable need explaining? When the fruit trees get their leaves, fruit is not far behind. When the world starts crumbling down around us, Jesus is not far behind. It really is not harder than that.

Law

1. It is the start of another year and that gives me occasion to stop and look around me. Somehow this year is radically different than the ones I used to know. Change is happening, and a lot of it I don't like. I don't like the changes that happen to my body as I age. I don't like the fact that the traditions which I found so meaningful when I was young my children disdain. I don't like the fact that we are so rootless and superficial.
2. These readings remind me once again of that terrible anxiety that always lies just beneath the surface. Jesus is coming, he is holy, pure, perfect, all the things that I am not. There is fire flowing from the throne of God, will it burn me up? Terrible tribulation will accompany his return; will I have the strength to stand on that last day?
3. There is a great deal lacking in my faith (I Thess) and I don't have the Apostle Paul coming for a visit to fill in the missing parts. Yes, I have his books, but they often seem to be written for different people and a different time. God, his prophets and apostles seem so distant to me.
4. The church seems so hypocritical, I feel so hypocritical. Like a scoundrel who has adopted the name "The righteousness of the Lord" my Christianity often seems like some actor's costume I have donned for a play but the real me is loathsome. God will not be deceived, he sees through the costumes and the makeup to the real me.

5. What if he comes and I am one of those grumpy old Pharisees who want to rebuke the folks who are singing the hosannas that day? What if I have totally missed it?

Gospel

1. “My word stands forever, heaven will pass away, but not my word” Amid the manifold changes of this world, some things just don’t change. I worship in a different language and a totally different culture from Augustine, Basil, Athanasius, and even Luther. But I worship the same Jesus and celebrate the same gracious actions of God because
2. It is the Son of Man who descends on the clouds. He has holes in his hands and feet where he died for me. The judgment of the last day is not a judgment of my life as much as it is a judgment of his redeeming work. I can be confident because my salvation rests on the work of God, not my work.
3. Again, God’s word stands forever. Filled with his Spirit, the Word of God is never far from us, but has been put on our lips and in our mouths. Yes the Bible is an old book and sometimes it seems alien to us, but that is more because it is God who speaks thoughts which are not our own and ways which are higher than ours. But His word elevates the Christian to himself and makes Christ present to us.
4. God has made me genuinely his child. I am no actor or sham when I call myself a Christian and when I pray the “Our Father.” He has called me his child, he has given me his name, who am I to deny that?
5. Jesus would spend most of Holy Week reaching out to the members of the Pharisees and the Sadducees who got it so wrong. His message of love and forgiveness were intended for them too. He rips my gaze from my own navel and bids me see what is far more important, his redeeming work.

Sermon Ideas

1. A king who really is “Lord is our Righteousness” (OT that the hearer would eagerly expect the righteous reign of Christ’s kingdom.)

This sermon, especially as we are coming out of an election year, might provide the preacher with some opportunities which need to be carefully considered. The cast of characters running for and occupying the highest office in the land hardly inspires confidence. Be careful with that. We are not hosting the “Tonight Show” or some other satirical piece. At the same time, don’t be afraid of it either. Jeremiah is making a very pointed political statement. We are also part of that world.

After three prior sons of his old partner in reform King Josiah, Jeremiah is dealing now with a fourth son of Josiah on Jerusalem’s throne. Of that bunch, only one, Jehoiachin, the grandson of Josiah, was worth anything. He did the right thing and surrendered to Nebuchadnezzar after 3 months in office. This last occupant of the throne of David is a piece of work. His name was Mattaniah but the king of Babylon gave him a new name

when he made Mattaniah king in place of his nephew. He chose “Zedekiah” which means “The LORD is our Righteousness.” Great sounding name, but unfortunately Mattaniah did not live up to it. The very act of the Babylonian Emperor choosing a name for you suggests that you are the emperor’s pet. After all, you name the things you own, your children, your dog, etc.

Jeremiah, the old advisor to Zedekiah’s father, longs for a day when the king really will be “the Lord is our Righteousness.” That stung the king. He did not like what Jeremiah said here and eventually tried to have Jeremiah killed for this and other words he spoke. It was a dangerous time to be a prophet.

Jeremiah’s longing is the focus of this message, however, for in looking around our world today we still see the same things. The people in office and those running for office are guaranteed to do one thing: disappoint. That may be because we think the government is actually able to do something about problems. That may be because they are just sinners like us. It is surely a combination of that and other factors. But they disappoint nonetheless. Like Jeremiah we long for the coming of the real king who really is the righteousness of the Lord, because he really is the Lord.

But we are people who look ahead by looking back. We anticipate the arrival of Jesus by considering his first advent those many years ago. The king who comes has power, great power, but he also has mercy and compassion. He will execute real justice for our sake. The land will dwell in security and peace. Read the verses on either side of our text and you will get a fuller picture of that. The longing of Jeremiah and his people can translate right into this day.

But the kingdom coming is not just an end of the world sort of thing. We pray for it to come every time we pray this Lord’s Prayer. The kingdom also comes when the servants of that King who reigns today live in that kingdom. Advent is not only a time when we look forward to the reign of Christ on that last day but also a time when we reflect on the reality that the reign of Christ has not been fully realized in my life. The old man still has the upper hand. The kingdom struggles sometimes to find expression in my life as the kingdom of darkness, sin, death, and devil too often is allowed a beachhead and dominion over me.

It is Jerusalem, the city with its inhabitants who are the righteousness of the Lord. Am I? This Advent season we turn our longing to examine the truth of our need, our need for this Jesus. His reign has already begun and I was made a citizen in baptism. That is sure and true, but it is also not yet fully true of any of us. A simple inventory of our lives reveals it. And yet, it also does reveal that kingdom. The charity, the generosity, the blessings which God works through me are also kingdom of God moments. The love and the beauty of my life are things which bear his fingerprints in my life.

So it also must be remembered that the one who comes in glory and had reigns today in heavenly splendor has holes in hands and feet where he shed his life blood for sinners,

broken and foolish and wayward sinners. The one who will establish justice and righteousness does so in mercy and grace.

2. Advent is Here (That the hearer would embrace this season which prepares him/her to celebrate the incarnation and the presence of Christ by focusing our attention on the need for this Jesus.)

This sermon is an introduction to the themes, rationale, and practices of the season so the hearer may enjoy, benefit, and rejoice in the practices of your congregation. The sermon text could be the Processional Gospel, the songs of the pilgrims and the palm fronds they wave. Jesus is coming, what do we do to celebrate that season? What I would hope is that we might capture the practices that are already in place and give them a measure of Christian identity. We don't wave a palm frond, at least not in this season, but we hang greens, and lights, we set up trees and give gifts. In Advent especially we notice a growing light (walk over to wreath or better yet, have the kids come up and demonstrate this for an object lesson) The candles don't mark the passage of time, but the growing of a light that draws nearer. Tie the candles to the lights on the houses. Rejoice that lots of folks who haven't a clue what they are doing, put up lights. (You might just show the clip from the recent film "The Grinch" with Jim Carey in which the families are in this competition for who has the most decorated house. If you haven't seen the film, I rather like it. Carey's depiction of a truly repulsive Grinch is interesting, although the director's psychoanalysis of a Dr Seuss character sometimes goes over the top.)

The film clip would be a great way to introduce the idea that we also use this time to repent, pray, and silently reflect. This is hard. Pitch the midweek services as an opportunity if you have them. The world wants to grab Christmas and make it all about money, self-indulgence and the accumulation of things. Advent quietly, gently, and persistently points us to a Jesus who lay in straw and received the gifts of kings because he had come to save this world from the very sins of self-centeredness, greed, and the rest of that vile crew. Advent gets us ready to celebrate his first birth in penitence, and to welcome Christ's second coming as we wave our lights, our gifts, our fir boughs and inflatable snow men yard ornaments with the palm frond wielding pilgrims of two thousand years ago.

The Gospel is simply that we are not responsible for our Christmas joy. Jesus is. The Law tells us to stop doing his job. The Gospel is that he really wants to do his job in our lives.

3. Lift up your heads – your redemption is near (That the hearer would see the problems of life, congregation, community, and world as occasions to rejoice in Christ who comes to solve all these problems and more.)

This is a much more sober sermon than the one which precedes. This sermon is about a sober and difficult reflection on the world. It is in pretty dire shape. Did you see the footage of...? What was it this week? Fires, floods, and other natural disasters? A humanitarian disaster in some war-torn country? A mass shooting? Or was it something else? It is always something.

What shall the Christian do in the face of all these things? We could hunker down and ride out the storm, but our theology suggests that eventually the storm will overtake us all. There are no safe places finally. Death will find us all. Our attempts to create safe and decent little places fail, often from a rot from within.

We could become some sort of a crusader who spends our life in the name of some cause, be it poverty or AIDS or slavery or Fill in the blank, there are a thousand different worthy causes which we can support. Such a life is noble and worthy, but it is probably not the way of most of us.

Jesus exhorts us to do something rather odd today. He urges us to stand up. When the natural inclination is to duck and hide, or steel oneself for some battle, he says stand up and rejoice. Salvation is at hand. Here's our old friend – the upside-down Jesus kingdom. He is always doing this to us.

The Christian watches the news with a peculiar little grin on his face. He does not delight in the terrible things that he sees. They pain him or her deeply, but every terrible thing, every pain, every hurt, every misery, all of them, are the things for which my Jesus died. That means that as I come to the celebration of his birth at Christmas I can gather them all up and lay them at the infant feet of Jesus. He will shoulder the burden of this whole world and carry that whole burden to Calvary's brutal cross. And one day, a day which he simply calls "soon" he will reappear in glory and all the beautiful things which he has promised will be there for every eye to see.

I watch the news and see the things for which my Jesus died, the sins he has forgiven, the deaths he has undone, the slaves he has freed. It also means I can get up and do something about them. I don't have to bear the responsibility of solving the problem. That is his. I can just lend a hand, be a person of Jesus in this place. It can happen wherever I am, in job, in home, in neighborhood, school, or anywhere else.

4. Missed Expectations or Mis-pectations (That the hearer would honestly reconsider his/her life and the salvation which they expect Jesus to bring – We proclaim the Savior who has come and will come – not the Savior we want to come or wish would come.)

The title sounds a little like a Jane Austen novel, doesn't it?

The Disciples of Jesus who sang "Hosanna" that first Palm Sunday spoke of Jesus the King, the Son of David, the one who brings peace and righteousness and justice. They heard the words of Jeremiah the prophet in today's OT reading.

Were they disappointed in the way the events unfolded as Holy Week progressed? Jesus did not kick out the Romans. He did not re-establish the kingdom of David in Jerusalem. The same old political mess was there the week after Easter as the week before. But it was all different, wasn't it?

What are our mis-expectations of Jesus? Do we expect that all will be perfect now that I believe? Do we think that if Jesus was really my king then my problems would go away?

Do we think that if we just believe hard enough then Jesus will take care of us and we don't need to worry about anything? Do we look for too little from him? Do we still cling to the need to solve these problems of sin and death ourselves, if not fully, at least in part. Do I still think I need to work off some of this sin? Do we expect God to make our congregation flourish and grow? What if it doesn't?

When the Pharisees tell Jesus to silence his disciples, he says that their praise cannot be silenced, and if it is, the very stones will cry out these words. Their expectation was not really wrong. Jesus does not refuse that praise, He is the Son of David and he does bring peace and justice and righteousness. But his gift is not quite what they expected and likely not what we expected.

But where is it? We will gather in a few weeks for the celebration of Christmas. We will proclaim Jesus is born, peace on earth, good will toward men. Are we lying? Are we deceiving ourselves? What is the peace that Jesus brought? Where is the goodwill, righteousness and justice which these readings seem to talk about? I have a hard time seeing it, just like the crowds did not see Jesus reestablishing the throne of David like David sat upon it.

This Advent season focuses our attention on these very things. Our lives are not "there" yet. There is a genuine righteousness deficit, a justice shortfall. One doesn't have to look too far either inside this heart or our culture to realize that. Jesus still has work to do among us, work which he is doing and will do as he makes us holy and blameless for that last day.

Yet, Jesus does not silence those disciples or our songs of praise this day. Why not?

Is it because he calls upon us to believe that indeed that he has worked righteousness and justice? Christianity might be called an Advent movement. Is not every Baptism, absolution and Lord's Supper an occasion when he comes and works those things in us? Yet, who among us can say that we don't long to see them with our eyes? We are distressed when we don't, but yet we are called upon to believe that it is so. Jesus rules this world wearing a crown of thorns and from the less than regal throne of a cross.

Advent reminds us of a brutal reality of this life. Like a child whose heart was set upon a specific gift under a tree, and is disappointed when it is not there, we look for the visible peace of God, and turn our eyes from the gift he has given. Advent reminds us that we are not there yet, but it also turns our eyes to the gift which Jesus has given. It is not easy, it is not comfortable, but it is ours. We do forgive sins, we do work righteousness that way. We do feed the hungry, we do comfort the grieving, Jesus is afoot in this. Our expectations may not be always met, but that may simply mean our expectations need to change. When we look at what Jesus is doing instead of focusing on what he is not doing, will that actually make us far more appealing to this community? The mis-expectation of Christ really saps us of our missionary zeal.

Jesus delights to hear us call him “King” and “Savior” and “God’s Righteousness.” We do so not because we see these things with these eyes that see, but with the faith which he has planted in our hearts, as we love him and others with the love he has given us, and as we live out of the holiness that he has created in us. (I Thess 3:11ff)

Illustration: Christmas Tree – we are expecting something.