

**1 Advent C – December 2, 2018 – Sarah D. Odderstol – St. John's  
Jeremiah 33.14-16 – I Thessalonians 3.9-13 – Luke 21.25-36**

Stop! Look both ways!! No sooner to do children learn to walk, then their parents are trying to slow them down. I can remember very clearly going for walks with my mother; I couldn't have been more than two years old. We lived in a sleepy little village of 700 hundred people where the only people who drove down the streets around my house were either my parents or my neighbors. Yet at each and every intersection my mother sternly warned, "Stop! Look both ways!!"

Our refrigerators are only recently cleared of the spoils of Thanksgiving dinner. We have 21.... and a half shopping days until Christmas. There are decorations that need to go up and cookies to be baked. All around us there are things that need to be done and people that demand our attention.

Here at church, the season and the color of our vestments have changed; we have begun a new church year. You would think the church would start the new church year off with a bang. We could offer early bird specials at the 8:00 service – two for one hosts at the Eucharist!! But that is not the way of Advent...nor – blessedly – is it the way of the church. As we stand at this intersection of time and place, Advent reminds us, "Stop! Look both ways!!"

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. Stores have been displaying Christmas decorations since the day after Halloween. Some of the more organized among us have been stocking up on Christmas gifts for months.

Now you come to church on this First Sunday of Advent, ready to hear stories of a swaddled babe, angels and shepherds. And what do you get? ...the hope-filled ranting of a prophet and Jesus' doom and gloom visions of the end of time. The church certainly didn't consult a marketer or PR firm when they planned Advent!

Advent is a season that looks both ways. Advent looks to the past and recalls the longing with which women and men living long ago prayed for the coming of God's promised Messiah. Advent also looks to the future with great hope for what God has yet to accomplish in creation. Advent is very much about being in-between: the in-between of God's work that was begun in creation and realized in the life of Jesus; work that will not be complete until Jesus returns. We live in the time between our birth and our death. We are constantly in-between beginnings and endings and endings and beginnings large and small.

The Celtic people learned to relish what they called "the time between the times". They seemed to know that in-between – in that place where we are not quite sure whether we are coming or going – we are somehow more keenly aware of God's presence. These are thin places – enchanted moments when the veil between this world and the world beyond us is thin, and we seem to breathe [divine] air.<sup>i</sup>

Although six centuries spanned between them, both Jeremiah and Jesus stood in the streets of Jerusalem and announced the city's destruction. Much of the story told in Jeremiah has to do with the prophecy about and fulfillment of the destruction of Jerusalem. This week's reading is addressed to a people already in exile following the utter desolation of Jerusalem.

Here God promises to protect and restore the people, even as they are in the midst of great suffering and at the edge of despair. Precisely in this in-between place God speaks the promise and in this thinness despair opens the door to creativity and hope.<sup>ii</sup> God's promise sparked in the exiled people the ability to imagine a future beyond Babylon.

In the season of Advent we are invited into the strenuous and crucial task of imagination. From whatever place of devastation or suffering or isolation we might find ourselves, we are called to imagine how God's promises of justice and holiness will bear fruit in our lives. Jeremiah reminds us that we cannot bring about God's future by force of our own will. Rather, by our waiting in-between, we find opportunities to partner with God in bringing about a new future.<sup>iii</sup>

One would think, with the beginning of a new church year, we would start at the beginning of Jesus' story in Luke. That would be too easy! Instead we find ourselves reading the end of the story, just before the plot to kill Jesus unfolds. Here, Jesus speaks not of his first advent, his birth, but of his second advent, his anticipated coming at the end of time. We are told not just to prepare, but... to beware. Jesus shouts, "Stop! Look both ways!!"

Writing at least fifty years after Jesus' death and resurrection, Luke had a deep and growing sense that following Jesus is a kind of living in-between – we are aware of Jesus, waiting for Jesus and we come to know Jesus in the midst of a busy, unpredictable, even tumultuous world. We believe that in the end, we will stand before Jesus and see him face to face. Yet in the meantime, we struggle to find Jesus in our day-to-day lives.<sup>iv</sup>

Luke's Jesus teaches like Jeremiah. Jesus says, "Yes, the world can be a very scary place. But do not let your hearts be troubled. You can trust in my promises. I have overcome the world and I will overcome death. Stop, look both ways, in the in-between-ness of it all there are mysterious and redeeming things happening all around you. Our redemption – [God's new reality] – is drawing near."<sup>v</sup>

Buried beneath last week's headlines about tear gas, climate change, and battles for political leadership, the Washington Post ran a very Advent-y essay by Jeremy Pivor in last week's Health and Science section of the Tuesday paper. Pivor not only survived childhood brain cancer, but also a reoccurrence ten years later. While going through radiation and chemotherapy to treat the reoccurrence, Pivor struggled with how to move forward in the face of endless uncertainty – until, he realized that, with or without cancer, everyone lives with uncertainty. Since he

never knew what the next day would bring, he decided he wanted to live now, in the present. For Pivor, living in the present meant fostering human connection; he felt he could do that best as a physician. So he applied to medical school.<sup>vi</sup>

Since starting medical school, Pivor's father has been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and Pivor's own cancer has returned. He still chooses to live in the present – in the in-between-ness of his life. Pivor makes the most of his life, between life and death. He writes, "...there is no textbook I could consult to find out how a patient-turned-medical student-turned-son of a dying father should act in a situation like this." Pivor strikes me as a man who looks both ways and who approaches everyday with a deep sense of gratitude. He has a willingness to be vulnerable – open to relationship and to love – even in the face of great uncertainty. Pivor is living an Advent life.

While Advent seems an odd season this time of year – a celebration of the in-between-ness of life when there is so much pressure to get on with life – the message and the melody of Advent are ones that we should remember and carry with us in every season. For they will sustain us even when life is scary. Do not let your hearts be troubled. Whatever darkness or desolation or despair you experience, none of this is permanent or ultimate. Your redemption is drawing near. Stop! Look both ways!! God is with us.

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<sup>i</sup> Leonard Beechy, "Living by the Word: Reflections on the Lectionary Sunday, November 29", *Christian Century* Vol. 126 No. 23, p.21.

<sup>ii</sup> Jennifer Ryan Ayres, "Theological Perspective: Jeremiah 33.14-16", *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C Vol. 1*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Eds., (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 4.

<sup>iii</sup> Ayres, 6.

<sup>iv</sup> Wesley D. Avram, "Pastoral Perspective: Luke 21.26-36" *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C Vol. 1*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Eds., (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 22.

<sup>v</sup> Avram, 22. paraphrase

<sup>vi</sup> Jeremy Pivor, "I've made my peace with my cancer; but not my dad's." *Washington Post*, Health & Science, Tuesday, November 27, 2018. Sec. E, p. 1, col. 1.