

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

CALL TO WORSHIP:

*God says, "The days are coming
when I will fulfill my promise to Israel.
I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David's line,
and he will do what is just and right in the land."*
Let us worship God.

(Jeremiah 33.14-15, adapted)

HYMN: People, look east

PRAYER OF APPROACH AND CONFESSION:

Holy, almighty, and righteous God:

We come into your presence on this First Sunday of Advent to begin preparing ourselves for the festival of Christmas. All around us, people are getting ready for Christmas in a whole variety of ways; but, as we come into your presence together, we know that the most important way to prepare is by making new room for you in our lives.

We confess that we so easily and unconsciously crowd you out of our lives. We forget that we need you, and we try to live by our own wisdom and strength. We forget that we are accountable to you, and we act in whatever ways we like. We forget that you are the God of the future as well as the past, and we fail to let your plan for the future influence the way we live in the present.

Forgive us, we pray, gracious God; for we have once again strayed into paths of sin. In this season of Advent, help us to work at getting back onto the right path — the path that leads to abundant and eternal life.

We pray in the name of Jesus, our Savior, and we pray together now, as he taught us:

THE LORD'S PRAYER

(Matthew 6.9-13, KJV)

ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS:

Hear this good news from the scriptures:

*Just as human beings are destined to die once,
Jesus Christ was sacrificed once,
to take away the sins of many.
And he will appear a second time,
not to bear sin,
but to bring salvation
to those who are waiting for him.*

(Hebrews 9.27-28)

So, if we have confessed our sin to God sincerely,

let us be assured that God will forgive us.

LIGHTING OF THE FIRST ADVENT CANDLE:

In our in-person service today, we will be lighting the First candle on our **Advent wreath** at this point in the service — the Candle of **Hope**.

For this recorded service, however, we'll have to do a virtual lighting of the candle, but I'll use the candle-lighting liturgy provided by the national church that we will use also in our in-person service.

*Hope is a flame that is given by God.
Hope for a new world burns in our hearts.
Hope burns in the message of the Law
and the teaching of the Prophets.
Hope is revealed in Jesus Christ.*

At this point, the candle will be lit.

Let us pray.

*Source of light:
Burn in our lives and in your world
with your renewing hope.
In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*

SCRIPTURE READINGS:

- **OT Reading:** Jeremiah 33.14-18 - “A righteous Branch from David’s line”
Jeremiah wrote these words at a dark time in Israel’s history. The Babylonians had invaded Israel, and Israel would soon be conquered.
Nevertheless, Jeremiah’s message in today’s reading is one of hope and encouragement.
- **Psalm:** Psalm 25.1-14 - “To you, LORD, I lift up my soul”
Psalm 25 is, in part, a lament — a prayer for help — in which the writer also asks God to forgive his sins, and to guide him in God’s ways.
However, in the second half of this portion of the psalm, the writer also speaks *about* God rather than *to* God, as if he’s teaching someone *else* about what God is like and what God does.
- **Letter Reading:** 1 Thessalonians 3.9-13 - “Blameless when our Lord Jesus comes”
In this reading, Paul expresses his hope that his readers will continue making progress toward being the kind of people that God wants them to be.
- **Gospel Reading:** Luke 21.25-38 - Jesus foretells his second coming
At this point in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus is in Jerusalem, where, shortly, he will be arrested and

put to death.

This reading is part of a larger passage in which Jesus speaks of the events that will lead up to his second coming at the end of the age.

HYMN: Make way, make way!

SERMON: “Hopeful Anticipation”

I don't know about you, but I find it hard to believe that it's already less than a month until Christmas! The older we get, I guess, the more quickly the years seem to pass. When I was a kid, the time between one Christmas and the next seemed almost to take for ever; but now that I'm in my sixties, Christmases seem to be a lot closer together!

And so, here we are again on the first Sunday of Advent — the first Sunday of the season in which we prepare ourselves for Christmas. When I was a kid, I understood “Advent” and “Christmas” to be pretty much the same thing. After all, in my home congregation in Hespeler, the first Sunday of Advent was when we started singing Christmas hymns. In recent decades, however, we Presbyterians have increasingly come to understand that Advent has a character of its own, separate from Christmas. It's a time of preparation, a time of anticipation, and indeed, a time of waiting. We wait for Christmas Day to arrive, looking forward to the festivity and fun with anticipation. During that time, we seek to prepare ourselves spiritually, as well; perhaps attending Sunday services more consistently, or doing our own devotional reading and praying at home more intentionally and regularly.

Today, we lit the first candle on our Advent wreath, which we Presbyterians designate as the “Candle of Hope”. The four Advent candle themes don't always match well with the lectionary readings for the same Sunday of Advent, but for the First Sunday, it always does; for the readings for this Sunday always speak of hope; of looking forward; of expectation and anticipation. They speak of promises made by God, and of the hope that those promises give us for the future.

Today's Old Testament reading from the Book of Jeremiah looks forward to a promised restoration of the monarchy and the priesthood in ancient Israel, following a time of distress and chaos. The Gospel reading looks forward to the promised second coming of Jesus, which will usher in a whole new age, in which the kingdom of God will at last be established in the world. Both of these promises were unfulfilled at the time these passages were written, and so both passages look to the future with hopeful anticipation — in somewhat the same way in which we today look toward Christmas Day with hopeful anticipation.

Today's Old Testament reading from Jeremiah was written at a time of great turmoil and suffering in ancient Israel. The Babylonians had invaded the country, and conquered its regions bit by bit. All that was left for them to subdue was Israel's heavily fortified capital, Jerusalem —

and soon it, too, would fall. The city and its temple would be left in ruins; and the majority of its inhabitants would be taken into exile in the Babylonian heartland, which is today southern Iraq.

Contrary to what one might expect, Jeremiah had been predicting a Babylonian victory. He saw such a victory as God's punishment of the Israelites for their unfaithfulness to the covenant — for their worship of gods other than Yahweh, their own God, and their failure to treat each other justly and fairly.

Needless to say, Jeremiah's predictions were not appreciated by Israel's leaders, who would've preferred him to rally the population, and predict an Israelite victory. So Jeremiah was incarcerated. The first verse of this chapter says that he *was confined in the courtyard of the guard* (Jeremiah 33.1). Yet, even as the Babylonians were battering Jerusalem's walls, and lobbing projectiles into the city over the walls, Jeremiah was predicting an eventual restoration of Israel and its capital. In today's reading, he quotes God as saying,

The days are coming when I will fulfill the good promise I made to the people of Israel and Judah. . . . (Jeremiah 33.14)

*In those days, Judah will be saved,
and Jerusalem will live in safety.* (Jeremiah 33.16a)

Specifically, God promises to restore Israel's monarchy and Israel's priesthood. Israel will once again be ruled by descendants of David, and Levitical priests will once again offer the prescribed sacrifices to God. In a time of distress and suffering, it was a message of hope for the future — one that sustained the people in the present.

The message of today's Gospel reading is actually quite similar. In it, Jesus speaks of the future — a time when his followers would suffer persecution; when the temple in Jerusalem (which had been rebuilt following the Babylonian conquest) would again be destroyed, this time by the Romans; when there would be unnatural phenomena in the sky and the sea — again, a period of distress and suffering. This time, though, the hopeful promise is of Jesus' glorious return from heaven. He says, *At that time, [people] will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud, with power and great glory. When these things begin to take place, lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near* (Luke 21.27-28).

Although Jesus doesn't actually spell it out in today's reading, other New Testament texts make it clear that the purpose of his second coming would be to inaugurate the kingdom of God in the world, fully and completely. People often refer to Jesus' second coming as "the end of the world"; but that's not quite right. It will be the end of the *age* — but at the same time, it will be the beginning of a whole *new* age: an age in which the creation is transformed, and restored to its original goodness, and in which everything happens in accordance with God's will. As it says in the Book of Revelation, *There will be no more death, or mourning, or crying, or pain, for the old order of things [will have] passed away* (Revelation 21.4). It's an extremely hope-filled vision of the future.

By the time that Luke and the other Gospel writers recorded these words of Jesus, much of what

Jesus predicts in this passage had already happened. Early Christians had already been experiencing persecution, as we see in the Book of Acts; and the glorious temple in Jerusalem lay in ruins — the consequences of a failed Jewish rebellion against Roman rule, in the years 66 to 70. Within a generation of Jesus' own time, then, much of what he predicts in today's reading had taken place. The main thing that hadn't yet taken place, of course, was his second coming and his inauguration of a whole new age.

The point of both the Old Testament and Gospel readings is that God intervenes in human history in order to bring his purposes about. Nevertheless, God very much follows his own timetable, not ours. As I mentioned last Sunday, King David's dynasty was never actually restored in Israel. For most of the period from Jeremiah's time to the time of Jesus, Israel was under foreign domination — a small region within one or other much larger empire. And even though Israel did briefly regain its independence in the middle of the Second Century B.C., it was ruled by a family other than that of David.

The writers of the New Testament, of course, teach that *Jesus* is the promised and long-awaited descendant of David — the so called "Messiah" — although Jesus never became king of Israel in the usual sense of the word. As I mentioned last Sunday, he changed the "job description" of the Messiah. His purpose was not to reign over a newly-independent Israel, but to bring about a new relationship between God and the people of Israel — and then to reach beyond the people of Israel to the rest of the world, to draw them into relationship with God as well. Ultimately, of course, his purpose is to reign over the entire world, which is what he will do when he returns from heaven.

The fact that Jesus still hasn't returned from heaven has created a significant difficulty for us who believe in him. The earliest Christians, including the apostle Paul, believed that Jesus' promised second coming would take place, not only within their own lifetime, but within a few short years at the most. Of course, that didn't happen, and over nineteen centuries later, we're *still* waiting for Jesus to come again.

What happens when a person makes a promise, and then takes an extremely long time to keep it? Often we lose faith in such a promise, don't we? Not quite two years ago, I loaned a significant sum of money to someone — not all at once, but a bit at a time. Each time he asked for some more, he earnestly promised that he would repay it all soon. Well, nearly two years has gone by, and he hasn't repaid any of it. Needless to say, I've lost faith in his promises. I no longer expect that I'll get that money back. Indeed, if he ever does repay some of that money, I'll be very surprised.

Is that the way we feel about the promise of Jesus' second coming? For some people, it is. They no longer take it seriously. Whatever they believe about Jesus, they don't believe that he will come again.

At the other end of the spectrum, there are those who are obsessed with the second coming of

Jesus, and, like First-Century Christians, believe that he will come back at any moment.

We Presbyterians tend to be somewhere in between those two extremes, I believe. We don't talk about Jesus' second coming a great deal, but from time to time, the topic does come up — such as on the First Sunday of Advent every year.

Interest in Jesus' second coming and the end of the age tends to increase in times of crisis. People wonder if the things going on in the world are the "these things" that Jesus was referring to in today's reading when he said, *When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near* (Luke 21.28). This has certainly been the case in the pandemic that we've been experiencing for more than a year and a half. Many people have wondered if it is a sign that the end of the age is near. On top of that, we have had climate-related hardships and disasters, such as the drought we've been experiencing here in Manitoba for the past couple of years, the extreme heat and forest fires that were experienced in various parts of the country this past summer, and now the severe rainfalls and the resulting landslides, washouts, and floods that have occurred in the past couple of weeks — not only in British Columbia, but also in the Atlantic provinces.

Are these signs that the end of the age is near, and that Jesus' second coming is imminent? Perhaps they are, and perhaps they aren't. No one knows. Many such predictions have been made in the past, and have all turned out to be mistaken.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus speaks of the suddenness of his second coming, implying that it will take most people by surprise. His advice to his disciples and followers, then, is to be constantly vigilant, and not to be distracted by other things, such as *carousing, drunkenness, and the anxieties of life*, as he puts it (Luke 21.34). Does this mean that we should drop everything and wait, then? That's probably not a good idea. Not knowing how long the wait will be, we could soon find ourselves in serious difficulty if we were simply to drop everything.

Somehow, we need to find a middle ground between being constantly preoccupied with Jesus' second coming, on the one hand, and ignoring it altogether, on the other. It seems to me that the best way to be prepared for it is to take our relationship with God seriously from day to day, to strive to live in his ways as best we can, and to serve him by serving others, with love and generosity. In this regard, I believe that Paul's words in today's reading from the Letters give us good advice. He says to his readers, *May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones* (1 Thessalonians 3.12-13).

Let's not lose sight of the fact that the second coming of Jesus is meant to be *good* news for us who believe in him, not *bad* news. Our attitude toward his return from heaven needs to be one of hopeful anticipation, not fear and anxiety. As the ancient Israelites drew strength from the promise that a descendant of David would one day reign over them again, let us draw strength from the prospect of living in the age to come as people who have been rescued

from the distress of the present age — living in the glorious future that God has in store for those who love him.

The promise of Jesus' second coming means that God's purpose and plan for the world have not yet reached their fulfillment. The promise of Jesus' second coming thus means that the world is not always going to remain as it is, with all its problems, hardships, pain, injustices, and nastiness. God has intervened in the world many times in the past, most significantly when Jesus came into the world the first time — the event that we celebrate at Christmas. Let us then look forward to his next and ultimate intervention with anticipation — and with hope.

HYMN: Hark, a thrilling voice is sounding

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE *[See separate document]*

OFFERING

PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING AND DEDICATION:

God of the past, the present, and the future:

We give you thanks for your abiding interest in us human beings and your entire creation. We thank you that you are not finished with us yet, and that you have plans for a glorious future, in which the whole creation will be transformed. We thank you too that you work in the world today to bring about healing and restoration in the lives of individuals, families, communities, and nations.

In gratitude for your purpose and plan, we present our offerings to you, now, to support the service that your church does for you in the world. Guide and direct that work, we pray, so that it may accomplish what you desire.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

HYMN: Your kingdom come, o God!

COMMISSIONING AND BLESSING:

Brothers and sisters in Christ:

Go into the week ahead, now,

in peace,

and in the strength of the Holy Spirit,

to continue living in hopeful anticipation of the age to come.

And may God bless you:

May he strengthen you,

so that you will be blameless and holy in his presence,

when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.
in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

(1 Thessalonians 3.13)