

Signs, Symbols & Seasons  
 Jeremiah 33:14-16, Luke 21:25-36

As you know, today is the first Sunday of the season of Advent.

It is also the first Sunday of the liturgical year –

the time when we begin again our cycle through Jesus' story.

A story whose annual telling is represented by all kinds of churchy symbols and seasons:  
 evergreens in Advent for the knowledge  
 of new and everlasting life;

a child at Christmas to remind us that

God's love lived among us;

a star at Epiphany, representing the many ways

Christ's light is revealed in the world;

Jesus' baptism and teachings in Ordinary Time

flow into Lent, when the bright story

grows challenging, deepening into

the shadows of Holy Week;

the sanctuary fills with flowers on Easter morning to signify new life;

the Holy Spirit's tongues of fire burn on Pentecost;

and the seasons of our liturgical year change again,

so that in our time we may live out – symbolically –

the birth, life and ministry, death and

resurrection of Jesus, our Messiah.

Today is the first Sunday of this new season and the beginning again of the story's cycle.

And Jeremiah's text gives us a place to start, a story of origins about the Messiah to come.

It is a prophecy of hope:

a long-expected leader will come from King David's line –

a descendency seemingly broken by Israel's exile.

But that stump, the root of David's father Jesse, will endure, Jeremiah assures.

And from it will spring forth a new branch.

We know that branch as Jesus, born in the city of David.

This reading from the prophet Jeremiah helps us recall our story's setting, the hopeful waiting for a righteous branch to spring up. It is appropriate for this season when we prepare for the Messiah's coming once more.

But what about Luke's reading?

With this text we are taken to the seeming *end* of the story,

right before the authorities confirm their plot to kill Jesus.

And even further it goes – to the end of all, "end times"!

Just as we are preparing for his birth,

Jesus' words are preparing us for his anticipated "second" coming.

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Time, in Advent, doesn't match with what we understand as time in the "real world", where there is chronology – past-present-future.

In Advent we're preparing for an event that happened over 2000 years ago, in the past – yet we still prepare for that event to happen again today, in the present.  
 Symbolically, but very definitely, we are awaiting Christ's coming.  
 And we will do the same next year.

Advent time falls outside of our  
 clocks  
 and watches  
 and perfectly-attuned-atomic-devices.

Advent time, like much of the liturgical year, keeps us in God's time;  
 keeps us in the story of our faith and how we might live it *into* our time.

This is a part of what we try to do in Advent:

live God's time *into* each moment of our time; not consider the two utterly distinct.

Our time tells us clearly – with all its signs and symbols of sales and lights and Rudolphs and Frostys – that it is the Christmas season.

God's time tells us (perhaps just as clearly but needing a bit more intention to read the signs and symbols) that we are to be ready, prepare ourselves for Christ's coming:  
 the first, the final, the ever-occurring.

Advent means "coming." And this is what Jesus is trying to convey in Luke's Gospel: he's coming.  
 But perhaps not in the sense of timing that we expect.

There will be signs, he assures us, of humanity's need for him.

There will be signs that strength in ourselves will not be enough; and that is when we will see him again.  
 "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and waves."

Yes. All of that is present and has been present: distress and confusion are absolutely a part of my life and my time... so are we living in end times?

Or is Jesus speaking of events in *every* human time  
 when we lose track of God's time amidst our own?

"People will faint from fear and foreboding...for the powers of the heavens will be shaken."

Again, the feelings are familiar, especially when we ponder  
 endless war,

global warming,

perennial partisanship –

all of which can lead our hearts to be

"weighed down with dissipation and the worries of this life."

But all of this is in *our* time:

we witness the mistakes of the past,  
 see their consequences in the present  
 and fear for the future.

Yet in these times of fear and foreboding, Jesus offers an alternative:

"Now when these things take place, stand up and raise your heads,  
 because your redemption is drawing near."

This is not “end-times” as we may have learned it, because again that’s *our* understanding of time with its linear progression of

past  
present  
and future

all neatly laid out.

Rather, this is God’s time – in the very midst of our time –

the ever,

eternity,

all-time-is-present-time-beyond-time-within-time

when fears and forebodings and foreclosures and lay-offs and illness

and all other anxieties can occur

simultaneously

with Christmas carols and family and eggnog

all in the fullness of the *same time*.

Confusing. Yes. Jesus knew so, with all these signs swirling around.

So he simplified it with yet another symbol: the fig tree right in front of them.

Something solid; something grounded – literally! – rooted to the earth and familiar.

Jesus draws us from the chaotic apocalyptic picture that can sometimes be our life (especially in this busy season) down into this center.

When the leaves begin to bud, he says, we know summer is coming.

It’s an easy-to-read, common sign of what’s to come, and you read it easily.

In other words, Jesus is telling his hearers: you can read the signs!

When there is distress and confusion in your time,

you need me!

When all seems fearful and foreboding in your time,

you need me!

When these things begin to take place in midst of the holidays

when you think you should be celebrating,

stand up and raise your heads –

don’t hunker down, turn to dissipation or overwhelming worries –

but raise your heads, for I am drawing near.

I am coming.

Advent.

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Attuned as we are to “our time,” we might think that the baby Jesus is the only Christ we’re awaiting in this season. Our Christmas expectations insist on constant cheerfulness even though it’s been a hard year for so many.

The thing about Advent is that – yes, we are joyfully preparing for the Christmas Christ child –

AND we are expecting the Christ who meets us in our fears and forebodings of the future;

AND the Christ who ever comes to renew our lives, dissuade our dissipation and pull us from beneath the weight of our worries.

“For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth.”

And so we prepare;

we are on guard and alert at all times for the signs of when we need him and how we need him.

Not just in this season, but always.

The Advent Christ can be bigger than a baby when we need him to be.

He can be the hoped for branch from the ancient prophecy.

He can be *in* history and at the *end* of history  
while being perfectly present to us here and now.

Advent *is* here and the Messiah *is* coming – how is he coming for you right now, in this time?

Is he the child in a manger?

The healer with a gentle touch?

Or a grown man shedding tears?

What are the signs speaking to your need for him?

And how will you prepare?

How will you live *God's* time  
into *your* time this season?

This is our challenge and gift in the season of Advent. Thanks be to God!