

“The Days Are Surely Coming”

Jeremiah 33.14–16

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 30 Nov 2003

Advent is about the weirdest season in the liturgical calendar. Today is the first day of the new church year, which begins with Advent, goes through Christmastide to Epiphany to Lent to Easter to Pentecost, and the cycle begins again. But it isn't odd just because the new year starts in November, not January. Advent is really peculiar because it's a season of anticipation, of waiting, of expectation, of dreams waiting to be realized.

In some ways, it's the ultimate in postmodernism. It's neither fully *a* or *b*. It's not really filled with the ebullient joy of Christmas, but it certainly isn't as solemn and introspective a time as Lent tends to be. Although, historically, Advent was a time for internal examination of one's soul, with the expectation that it could be a time of spiritual rebirth that coincided with the birth of the messiah at Christmas.

Advent flies in the face of the dominant culture in which we live. We are told that gratification should be immediate. (Anyone who has a computer that runs at less than 1 gigahertz or uses dial-up for Internet access knows what I'm talking about.) We want it **now!** We don't want to wait for food to be prepared in a restaurant, we want to drive through and have it ready when we get to the second window. I was amazed when I visited my sister in Atlanta last year: we drove through to get a double latte at Starbucks and then drove to Einstein Brothers to get a bagel with schemer at the drive-through window! It's worse than L.A.! We want it **now!**

A difficult aspect of Advent is that no matter how hard we try, we **can't** get it all now. We are powerless to control the coming of the messiah. The prophet Jeremiah wrote about 600 years before the birth of Jesus, whose coming he foretold. He was powerless to hurry along the process of Jesus' birth, too.

Our hurry-up-and-get-it-now attitude gets worse at this time of the year, doesn't it?! I don't know if you went shopping on Friday morning, with all the other folks who inaugurated the onset of the “holiday shopping season,” but if you did, you probably waded through masses of humanity and encountered some traffic. And when, in our culture of quickness, we can't get what we want **now**, we get frustrated. Did you see Amy Nesler quoted in yesterday's Coloradoan about International Buy-Nothing Day (which was held on Friday)? Some folks **are** bucking the trend.

If Jeremiah were here, he might issue this prophecy: “The days are coming,” saith the Lord, “when the people shall do battle over parking places, and the Gentiles shall spend exorbitant sums on things they do not need, and they shall meet with the frustrations and unmet expectations associated with ‘the holiday shopping season.’” The days are coming!

So, how do we avoid the downside of this time of year? I'd like to suggest that you have taken the first step: you've started the season of Advent by coming to worship. You've sung an Advent hymn or two. You've witnessed the symbol of light shining in the night. This is a time for you to slow down, take a load off, lay your worries to rest, and focus on the real, underlying reason for our celebration at this time of year: the coming of the messiah.

You have already taken a step toward the dynamic tension we experience at Advent: holding both the hubbub of the season in balance with the internal, spiritual dimension of this season of waiting for something new. The day is coming.



Some of you who grew up in the Episcopal tradition may be familiar with a famous collect (or brief opening prayer) that is appointed for the first Sunday in Advent:

“Almighty God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which thy Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the quick and the dead, we may rise to life immortal; through him who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, one God, now and for ever. Amen.”

There again, we hear a series of contrasts that we hold in balance: light and the absence of light, peasant Jesus and cosmic ruler. We are called to hold these things in dynamic tension.

One of my favorite authors, Frederick Buechner, wrote about this famous prayer and its contrasts this way: “All the paradoxical themes of Advent are compressed into that handful of words: Christ coming at Christmas time in great humility and again at the end of time in glorious majesty – Christ coming as a child to save us and as a king to judge us – mortal life, immortal life. They clatter against each other like shutters in the wind with all their points and counterpoints. They all but deafen us with their message at one and the same time of sin and grace, justice and mercy, comfort and challenge. ‘Cast away the works of darkness,’ they say, and put on ‘the armor of light.’ Maybe those are the words that best sum up the paradox of who we are and where we are. Somewhere between the darkness and the light. That is where we are as Christians. And not just at Advent time, but at all times. Somewhere between the *fact* of darkness and the *hope* of light. That is who we are.

‘Advent’ means ‘coming’ of course, and the promise of Advent is that what is coming is an unimaginable invasion. The mythology of our age has to do with flying saucers and invasions from outer space, and that is unimaginable enough. But what is upon us now is even more so – close encounter not of the *third* kind but of a different kind altogether. An invasion of holiness. That is what Advent is about.

What is coming upon the world is the Light of the World. It is Christ. That is the comfort of it. The challenge of it is that it has not come yet. Only the hope for it has come, only the longing for it. In the meantime we are in the dark, and the dark, God knows, is also in us. We watch and wait for a holiness to heal us and hallow us, to liberate us from the dark. Advent is like the hush in a theater just before the curtain rises. It is like the hazy ring around the winter moon that means the coming of snow, which will turn the night to silver. Soon. But for the time being, our time, darkness is where we are.”¹



“**What are you waiting for?!**” Those words are meant to provoke someone into action. That’s the voice of our culture speaking. But if we say those words differently, and let them soak into us deeply, like bathwater that wrinkles the skin on our fingertips, they have a different meaning altogether: What are *you* waiting for?

There is a passive sense of waiting, and an active sense of waiting. How different does it sound if I ask you, “What is it that you’re looking forward to?” or “What are you anticipating?”

Last week, Cameron, our 8-year-old son, had a homework assignment in which he had to list three things that he hoped for in the world. Cam’s three hopes for the

¹ Frederick Buechner, from a sermon, quoted in *Listening to Your Life*, p. 314.

world would be no war, no farming in the rainforest, and no smoking. (The propaganda works, at least for now!)

Advent is a time for hope. It is a time for dreaming, of envisioning a world that you'd like to help God bring into being. As we went through the Pilgrim service of worship last Thursday, I was struck that they had a time following the sermon for "prophesying and exhortation." Prophesying! Imagine that! Imagine that God is still speaking to us through dreams and visions of how the world could be. ***The day is coming!***

The day is coming when:

- shalom and salaam will be lived between Israelis and Palestinians;
- when Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland will abandon arms and age-old hatreds and embrace;
- when AIDS will be cured;
- when starvation of any one of God's children will be a distant memory;
- when racism, sexism, heterosexism will be no more;
- when domestic violence will be prevented before it happens;
- when would-be terrorists will be so satisfied with their lives and their love that plans will never develop;
- when nations sit down at the negotiating table and the battles that consume them will never extend beyond a war of words;
- that all people will have the opportunity to earn a fair wage;
- that all people will find a path to know God and to develop a relationship with the divine.

What are your dreams and visions? What is your prophesy? Karl Marx once called religion "the opiate of the masses," a soporific drug that lulled people into inattention and docile acceptance of the status quo. That is not true religion.

I fear that the opiate of the masses in our culture is big retail (Walmart and Sam's Club); advertising giants like BBDO and Interpublic Group; media empires like Disney/ABC, General Electric/NBC and Fox. We Americans are being lulled into an alternating state of brief euphoria and strong desire based on avarice and shallow entertainment. Our national narcotic of choice is consumerism, and the drug delivery system is television. So, as the German Advent chorale says, "Sleepers Awake! A voice is calling!"

I'd like to know what your prophecy is. What are your dreams and visions? Will you do something for me? Pass out the red "Friendship Pads" again and next to your name or on a blank line, write down one hope or dream or vision for yourself or for God's world, and we'll print them in next week's bulletin as a form of prayer and intention.



As we begin this Advent pilgrimage together, let us remember to have hope: not the dreamy wishing upon a star, but of hoping profoundly for the light of the world to shine brightly.

And as we walk this pilgrim way, let us carry Christ's light into the world.
Amen.