

“GETTING READY FOR THE LIGHT”

Date: December 3, 2006

Text: Jeremiah 33: 14-16; Luke 21:25-36

The Advent sermons this year all lead up to that glorious moment on Christmas Eve when the congregation exuberantly declares: **The Light shines in the darkness and the darkness never will put it out.** Today on the first Sunday of Advent the topic is “Getting Ready for the Light.” How do we in the midst of all that we have going on this month from school concerts to gift shopping to parties find the time and energy to make sure that the celebration of Christ’s birth doesn’t get lost in the shuffle?

Our two scripture readings may help us find a way as both talk of a time when God will do a new thing to re-establish his partnership with his people. We need to deal with a complicated issue before we can probe further. From what Jesus appears to be saying, this new day will be preceded by hardship and misery, which raises the question of the 2nd Coming. Do you have friends who readily tell you that Christ will come again in the near future or who quote from the popular Tim LeHaye books? What do you say to them? Those people are apt to take Jesus’ predictions in Luke 21 that the new age will be preceded by hardship and misery and quickly point to the mess in the Middle East as a sign of end times. It is important given the tendency of a part of Christianity to want to set a date for some ultimate divine action to note that neither the Old nor New Testament makes reference to specific dates. Indeed, the Book of Acts, chapter, 1, clearly states, “It is not for us to know the times and seasons of God’s activity.” Trying to look around the corner for the next hurricane or earthquake or conditions in the Middle East as a sign that the kingdom is at hand is not in the Biblical mode.

What is neglected when the 2nd Coming is overemphasized is that whatever God’s messenger is going to bring about will begin to unfold in the present moment! One continuing theme at the Harry Emerson Fosdick convocation I attended in late October was to emphasize the phrase in the Lord’s Prayer: “Thy Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.” Speaker after speaker said that Christ came to make things different not just in the future but in the present moment right here on earth! Hence, the real message of both Jeremiah, who predicts God will send someone, and the Gospel of Luke, is one of HOPE. Advent is a time to talk about the “Light that will shine in the darkness” and the possibilities that declaration creates in all our lives.

I read one time that during the Inquisition, a very sad time in church history, that two priests visited the cell of a rabbi who had been brutally tortured. They informed him that he would slowly be burned to death the next morning. When they left, the rabbi could not believe it but the cell door had failed to lock. Miraculously he made his way along a long corridor twice avoiding priests by hiding in the shadows. Finally he arrived at garden where he almost could smell freedom. As he dreamed of life with his family, he suddenly felt arms close around him and he stared into the eyes of the Grand Inquisitor. ‘Ah. My friend, would you leave us on the night of your last chance for repentance?’ Then, the rabbi realized that he been a victim of a plot to destroy the last vestiges of hope.

Such is the importance of hope. Life can become a dreary, dark tunnel unless you have something to look forward and something to base your life upon. Thus, it is not surprising that the Bible continually reminds us to trust in God regardless of what tomorrow has in store. The Almighty never forsakes us and a new beginning can break into the midst of whatever is going on around us. Indeed, the new beginning already has taken place in the life, death and resurrection of Christ. Hence, we don’t have to wait until some future catastrophic moment in history to begin to enjoy the benefits of God’s love. Hopefully, the Divine Presence was very much a part of all of our celebrations over Thanksgiving. After we count our blessings, we, then, move forward anticipating the celebration of December 25th. As Jeremiah promised, the one God will send shall be called “The Lord will be our righteousness” and he will lead us into new paths of peace and justice.

What both passages emphasize is that the time to get ready to walk in the Light is right NOW! To find and live in the hope given by Jesus the Christ each one of us needs to start getting ready! The first Sunday in

Advent clearly, then, is a time to talk about “Getting Reading For The Light.” The early Church must have anticipated the hecticness of 2006 for by the 4th or 5th Century a time was set aside for Christians to prepare for Christmas and they weren’t thinking of gifts and cards but rather of spiritual preparation. December 3rd is the day to begin to prepare and every day thereafter so that one’s spiritual life is front and center during the mad rush that is labeled “The Christmas Season.” I say that ever so keenly aware that in our commercial society that the canned holiday music and emergence of Santa Claus occurs right after the Halloween decorations was put away!

We all have lists of things to get done before Dec. 25th, don’t we? But where does spiritual preparation fit in? Reading all the holiday ads, Marilyn and I often remark about how hard it is to shop for gifts for children these days. I saw a list of the top 10 toys for 2006 and the cheapest one was \$35! And, of course, good luck if your child or grandchild wants the latest Play Station! It isn’t easy to move beyond the commercialism of the season but that is our challenge. One year the peace and justice committee of the church I was serving had a program encouraging families to buy non-war toys and that still seems to be a good idea in my opinion. Other modest, practical suggestions can be found in the bulletin insert.

It never is simple to start walking into the Light but according to Jeremiah and Jesus NOW is the time to begin to think in those terms. One doesn’t automatically arrive at the manger on Christmas morn. One has to journey, as did the shepherds and wise men. Finding time for prayer and worship and family sharing and helping others is no small task with all that is going on but a great effort needs to be made. God is at work bringing in a new heaven and earth, that is the promise of December 25th and, if we want to share in this new creation, we need to start getting prepared.

Here is a true story. It was Palm Sunday and a three –year-old child had to stay home from church because of strep throat. When the rest of the family returned from worship carrying palm branches, he asked what they were for. His father explained, “People held them over Jesus’ head as he walked by.” “Wouldn’t you know it,” the boy fumed. “The one Sunday I don’t go, Jesus shows up.”

The morale of the story? You never know when or where Jesus is going to show up: in worship, at work, he’s even at the mall. **BUT WE HAVE TO BE READY!** And no better place to start than at the Lord’s Table.