

# *First Sunday of Advent*

## *Jeremiah 33:14–16*

<sup>14</sup>The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. <sup>15</sup>In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. <sup>16</sup>In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: “The LORD is our righteousness.”

## *Luke 21:5–19*

<sup>5</sup>When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, <sup>6</sup>“As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.”

<sup>7</sup>They asked him, “Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?” <sup>8</sup>And he said, “Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and, ‘The time is near!’ Do not go after them.

<sup>9</sup>“When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.” <sup>10</sup>Then he said to them, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; <sup>11</sup>there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.

<sup>12</sup>“But before all this occurs, they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. <sup>13</sup>This will give you an opportunity to testify. <sup>14</sup>So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; <sup>15</sup>for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict. <sup>16</sup>You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. <sup>17</sup>You will be hated by all because of my name. <sup>18</sup>But not a hair of your head will perish. <sup>19</sup>By your endurance you will gain your souls.”

# ORDER OF WORSHIP

## OPENING WORDS / CALL TO WORSHIP

The days are surely coming, says the LORD,  
when I will fulfill my promise to my people.

*Jer. 33:14–16*

**Justice and righteousness will fill the land  
and all will live in peace and safety.**

## LIGHTING OF THE ADVENT CANDLES

*[Reader 1]:* We light this candle as a symbol  
of the hope we have in the promise of the  
Lord's coming.

*[Reader 2]:* For the Lord will fulfill his promise  
to the house of Israel and the house of Judah.  
A righteous Branch will spring up for David;  
and he shall execute justice and righteousness  
in the land.

*[All]:* **Come, Lord Jesus, come!**

## HYMN, SPIRITUAL, OR PSALM

### CALL TO CONFESSION

Testify with honesty the condition of your souls.  
Give defense not for yourself but only the  
Lord's grace,  
which will save you in your time of trial.  
With confidence in God's mercy,  
let us confess our sin.

*Luke 21:13–14*

### PRAYER OF CONFESSION

**Lord, have mercy on us.  
We are not ready for your coming.  
We live in sin, as though there were no justice.  
We live in fear, as though there were no grace.  
Forgive us, Lord.  
Show us your mercy and steadfast love.  
Lead us in your truth, and teach us your paths,  
for you are the God of our salvation. Amen.**

## DECLARATION OF FORGIVENESS

The Lord is our righteousness.  
In Christ, we are forgiven.

*Jer. 33:16*

## PRAYER OF THE DAY

Holy One, you have promised us  
that the day of our salvation is near.  
Keep us faithful in love and watchful in prayer,  
so that we may stand with confidence and joy  
at the coming of Christ, our redeemer and Lord. **Amen.**

## HYMN, SPIRITUAL, OR PSALM

### PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Amid much confusion,  
signs leading away from you,  
we seek your truth.  
Open our hearts  
to the wonders of your work  
and the wisdom of your word. **Amen.**

*Luke 21:15*

## SCRIPTURE READINGS

## SERMON

## HYMN, SPIRITUAL, OR PSALM

### PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

*[A brief silence may follow each petition.]*

Let us pray to the Lord, saying,  
in your mercy, Lord, save us.

Merciful God,  
you call us to goodness and lead us on right paths.  
You encourage us with signs of your coming  
and urge us to keep watch,  
that we might greet you with heads raised high  
when you come to restore all of creation.  
Watching and waiting, we pray for this world that  
needs your saving power.

For nations at war,  
in your mercy, **Lord, save us.**  
For all who suffer from violence, in the streets or in their homes,  
in your mercy, **Lord, save us.**  
For all who live in worry or fear,  
in your mercy, **Lord, save us.**  
For those who have forgotten the ways of righteousness,  
in your mercy, **Lord, save us.**  
For those who have never heard of your rescuing love,  
in your mercy, **Lord, save us.**  
For all those who have lost hope, or never had it at all,  
in your mercy, **Lord, save us.**

We pray, too, for your church in the world,  
that we may increase in ardor for you and your children,  
and work in confidence for your coming reign.  
Now by the power of your Holy Spirit, make us ever more faithful,  
that we may greet you in confidence and joy on that great day;  
through Christ, in whose name we pray. **Amen.**

#### **LORD'S PRAYER**

#### **INVITATION TO THE OFFERING**

Trusting in the sure promises of Christ,  
and grateful for the Spirit's sustaining power,  
let us bring our tithes and offerings to God.

#### **PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING/DEDICATION**

God of righteousness,  
you have saved us from the worst the world can do  
and have promised to redeem the whole creation when  
Christ comes again.  
In faith and hope we offer our gifts of money and self,  
that we may be part of what you are doing in the world even now,  
as we watch for Christ's coming in glory. **Amen.**

#### **HYMN, SPIRITUAL, OR PSALM**

#### **CHARGE**

Hear with your hearts  
the word and wisdom of the Lord.

*Luke 21:15*

## BLESSING

May the God of mercy keep you,  
the Holy Spirit cheer you,  
and Christ in glory greet you,  
now and at the day of his coming.

## SONG SUGGESTIONS

Included are songbook numbers for *Chalice Hymnal* (CH), the Episcopal Church's *Hymnal 1982* (EH), *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW), *Gather Comprehensive*, 2nd ed. (GC), *Glory to God: The Presbyterian Hymnal* (GTG), *The New Century Hymnal* (TNCH), and the *United Methodist Hymnal* (UMH).

“Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus” (CH 125, EH 66, ELW 254, GC 323, GTG 82–83, TNCH 122, UMH 196)

“Comfort, Comfort Now My People” (CH 122–123, EH 67, ELW 256, GC 326, GTG 87, TNCH 101)

“Light One Candle to Watch for Messiah,” stanza 1 (ELW 240, GTG 85)

“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” (CH 119, ELW 257, GC 317, GTG 88, TNCH 116, UMH 211)

“O Day of God, Draw Nigh” (TNCH 611, UMH 730)

“The Days Are Surely Coming” (GTG 357)

“To a Maid Whose Name Was Mary” (GTG 98, UMH 215)

“While We Are Waiting, Come” (GTG 92)

## CHILDREN’S SERMON

*Based on Jeremiah 33:14–16, with references to Isaiah 43 and Malachi 4:5–6*

Things look different in church this time of year. We use blue or purple cloth and candles, and we have evergreen wreaths and garland. This time of year, when we start getting ready to celebrate Jesus’ birth at Christmas, is called Advent. Advent is a time of expectation. “Expectation” means “looking forward to something,” and during Advent, we are looking forward to Jesus being born. During Advent, we read about the things that happened before Jesus was born and imagine what it would have been like to be living before Jesus was born, looking forward to when he would come.

God's people in Judah a long, long time ago had a lot of scary things happen to them. Armies and kings from other countries invaded their land and took over. The people were scared, but God promised to send a savior to rescue them. God gave people called "prophets" messages to give the people hope. The prophets said, "Do not give up hope. A savior is coming. God promised, and God does not break promises."

The prophets used stories the people already knew, to help them watch for the savior. They said that when the savior comes, it would be like the great king David was still on the throne, back when you were safe and no armies and kings from other countries were taking over. It would be like when Moses parted the sea to lead the people out of slavery in Egypt, into the promised land. It would be like that very special prophet, Elijah, coming back to make our people righteous again.

The people knew about David and Moses and Elijah. David and Moses and Elijah were heroes to these people, so they knew that if the savior would be like these heroes—or even better than them—this savior must be really, really special. So they kept watching and hoping for when God would send the savior.

Even though we live a long time after Jesus, we still watch and hope for him, because he really is a very, very special savior.

**Prayer:** Thank you, God, for sending Jesus to us. Amen.

## SERMON HELPS

### *Jeremiah 33:14–16*

#### THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

This brief essay will attend to the continuing theological significance of (1) the reality of human despair, (2) a reading of the promise in light of both the experience of exile and the practice of waiting in Advent, and (3) the collective and sociopolitical aspects of the promise.

***The Reality of Human Despair.*** Much of the story told in Jeremiah has to do with the threat and fulfillment of the destruction of Judah and, in particular, Jerusalem. The people have been violating their covenantal relationship with God, and the subsequent Babylonian control would serve as punishment for their infidelity. The complete sacking of Jerusalem, however, is more horrific and absolute than the people might have imagined. The destruction is so severe that God's voice, through the prophet, also wails in lamentation.

In view of the devastation that characterizes the sociohistorical context of the “Book of Consolation,” Kathleen O’Connor describes the situation of the people in this way: “The people... are taken captive, dragged from their land, and deprived of their Temple. They are beaten, imprisoned, and face death as a people, and, like Jeremiah, they cry out to God in anger and despair.”<sup>1</sup> John Calvin imagined the context in even more explicit terms: “As they were then exposed to slaughter, . . . the children of God saw thousand deaths; so that it could not be but that terror almost drove them to despair; and in their exile they saw that they were far removed from their own country, without any hope of a return.”<sup>2</sup>

When faced with such death, slaughter, and imprisonment in a strange place, who would not despair? While despair is among the most human of human conditions, it cannot be fully understood apart from its theological implications. In a number of his writings, Reinhold Niebuhr associated despair with our failed attempts to procure security for ourselves, optimistically pretending that we are not subject to the vicissitudes of creatureliness. Despair is characterized primarily by the conspicuous absence of theological hope. Humans meet despair when they cannot imagine God’s promised alternative future.

***God’s Promise to a People Waiting.*** The writer recounts the promises made to “the house of Israel and the house of Judah,” that God would provide the people a safe, just, and peaceful future under a justly appointed and righteous ruler. This week’s reading is addressed to a people in exile. God’s promise, in this case, is meant to be a comfort and source of hope to the exiled, rather than a foretelling of the faithful remnant that appears between Jeremiah’s condemnations of unjust rulers. Here we meet the God who promises to protect and restore the people, even as they are in the midst of great suffering and at the edge of despair. It is in precisely this context that God speaks the promise, and it is in precisely this context that despair opens the door to creativity and hope. Calvin acknowledged that the promises of God seem to disappear, but that with faith and patience, we look forward to their fulfillment.

In part, this is the theological significance of Advent too. The inclusion of prophetic literature in the Advent lections points to the importance of

1. Kathleen O’Connor, “Jeremiah,” in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 174.
2. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations*, vol. 4, ed. and trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 247. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom20.i.html> (accessed from Christian Classics Ethereal Library).

waiting, anticipating, and trusting in a promised future that seems very removed from our current circumstance. And it is in the season of Advent that we engage in the strenuous and crucial Christian task of *imagination*. Together with the prophet, we are called not only to name suffering and injustice, but to lean into God's promised alternative future.

Theological imagination is not speculative, but relies on God's continuous presence and acts on behalf of creation over time. Trusting in God's provision for us in the past, we imagine what shape God's fulfillment of promises will take in the future. Although we do not bring about God's intended alternative future through sheer force of will, in our waiting we do try to place ourselves in a posture so that we might become partners with God in the advent of a new reality.

***The Collective and Sociopolitical Aspects of God's Promise.*** The promise Jeremiah recalls is not an otherworldly, escapist spirituality that encourages us merely to "wait it out." Particularly in the prophetic literature, and echoed in Gospel texts like the Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55), we find repeated affirmations that God's promise includes a transvaluation of social, economic, and political relationships. In this particular lection, the prophet anticipates a time in which even the failed leadership will be made aright and "do what kings are supposed to do, namely, practice justice and righteousness. . . . When the king practices justice and righteousness, the city and the land will be healed and saved."<sup>3</sup> In the creative moment of near-despair, the prophet calls us to imagine a new social context in which we live together in safety, peace, and righteousness. God will do this, as promised, and even bring about new life for the city.

JENNIFER RYAN AYRES

## PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

"In those days . . ." On Christmas Eve Luke will turn the church back to a historical context of Jesus' birth, anchoring the event in time with persons and places, in a world of Caesar and census: "In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered" (Luke 2:1). But on the First Sunday of Advent, Jeremiah turns us forward to the future: "In those days and at that time . . ." In these days before Christmas the future is not where our culture encourages us to go; it fosters a holiday experience that is nostalgic and immediate. "In those days and at that time" God will

3. Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 318.



decreed justice and righteousness. Seasonal traditions dictate charity. “The days are surely coming” when God will fulfill the promise. We are sure that consumerism will deliver our fulfillment. The church is called to hear the prophets in this season, not for “once upon a time” background music, but for an overture playing in real time, sounding themes to be developed going forward. “In those days” there will be “justice and righteousness,” peace and security. The church may light its Advent candles for preparation, hope, joy, and love, but the prophets sound justice and righteousness.

A pastoral perspective on Advent is attuned to the yearnings of our day for a different day, and aware of both the temptation to look backward for God and good and the trepidation in looking forward. The prophet Jeremiah speaks a pastoral word, assuring the people of his time and ours that what is coming is of God. He is adamant about the things that we are tentative about: “The days are surely coming . . .” (here and in 23:5–6; see also 31:27, 31, 38); “I have . . . plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope” (29:11). There will be a future in God’s time and fulfillment on God’s terms. This particular text envisions not a day to come at Advent’s end, but days to come that will inaugurate a new beginning.

The congregation that observes Advent will mark time differently from those people who live December as a countdown to Christmas and the end of the year. The Sundays of Advent count forward to a time that begins with the birth of Christ. The First Sunday of Advent is for Christians the first Sunday of the year, a new year in sacred time, opening to the mystery and certainty of God’s presence. Worship that celebrates an alternative New Year’s Day affirms time as God’s home and workplace, not as a calendar of accumulating years but as a movement toward fulfillment, not a day for self-improvement resolutions but for community reaffirmation of trust in God’s promises, past, present, and future. “With grateful hearts the past we own; The future, all to us unknown, We to your guardian care commit.” Philip Doddridge wrote on the manuscript of his hymn, “For the New Year.”<sup>4</sup>

Jeremiah 33:14–16 preached on the First Sunday in Advent rightly leads to the Eucharist; in this sacrament believers are nourished by the hope of God’s coming and participate in God’s future. An Advent liturgy recalls that through the words of the prophets God promised the Redeemer, “and gave hope for the day when justice shall roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever rolling stream.”<sup>5</sup> Prayers that are evoked by this text will acknowledge God as the One who lives and moves and comes to us in time

4. Philip Doddridge (1702–51), “Great God, We Sing That Mighty Hand,” in *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 265.

5. *The Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 133.

and who works justice and righteousness in all times; they will express gratitude for time as God's good gift; they will confess our preoccupation with the immediate and our fear of the future; they will ask for our confidence in God's tomorrow and pray for those who yearn for the justice and righteousness that they will not know in their days.

Congregational life during Advent that is faithful to the prophetic vision of "the days . . . surely coming" emphasizes political as well as personal relationships. This text insists that covenantal life in all its expressions is characterized by justice and righteousness, allowing no dichotomy of "prophetic" and "pastoral." Life together is to embody the nature of God, "The LORD is our righteousness." Jeremiah uses the name first for a promised person (23:6) and again here, intentionally, for a promised place (33:16). The vision of the time to come impugns the time at hand. What leader and what community could claim "The LORD is our righteousness"? The promise challenges our reality, and drives a reappropriation of "righteousness." The word is uncommon, if not pejorative, in common parlance and unwelcome in the lexicon of many faithful because of its frequent companionship with "self."

One of the pastoral tasks is to teach the vocabulary of faith, and "righteousness" is one of the first words of the language of Advent. In Matthew's Gospel, "righteousness" is Jesus' first word, spoken to John the Baptist: "Let it be so now . . . in this way to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt. 3:15). Righteousness is not an attitude or an absolute standard. It refers to conduct in accord with God's purposes. It is doing the good thing and the God thing; right doing as opposed to wrongdoing, and doing as opposed to being. Self-righteousness is the inflated ego of self-approval; righteousness is the humble ethic of living toward others in just and loving relationships. A congregation will be edified by preaching and teaching that brings righteousness into its language and life. It will be challenged to reflect on the integrity of its witness in the world. *Is the Lord our righteousness? Are we ready* to be named and claimed by that kind of God? *Are we willing* to welcome the day when God's justice and righteousness will be fulfilled?

DEBORAH A. BLOCK

## EXEGETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Part of the climactic verses of the Little Book of Comfort, as chapters 30–33 in the book of Jeremiah have been called since Martin Luther, the lectionary passage Jeremiah 33:14–16 proclaims salvation in the form of restoration of the Davidic monarchy and pronounces a new name for Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile. The subsequent verses also promise the revival of the Levitical priesthood. Set in a part of the book of Jeremiah where destruction

of the Holy City and deportation of the people to Babylon has been threatened numerous times and already taken place for the royal court and the upper classes (see the cycles of judgment oracles in Jer. 1–25 and throughout the remainder of the book), these eschatological promises of a different historical reality are spoken to give hope to a crushed people and inspire faithful endurance of the present circumstances.

How one understands what is meant by the present time and realities for Jeremiah depends on which hypothesis of composition of the book one accepts. Most biblical scholars locate the passage in exilic or postexilic writings of members of the Deuteronomistic school, who are generally considered the authors and editors of the prose sections of the book of Jeremiah during the later sixth century BCE.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the passage represents a vision of a radically new future added in retrospect with a postexilic audience in view. When read, however, from a literary canonical perspective,<sup>7</sup> the Little Book of Comfort and verses 14–16 of chapter 33 therein function as a temporary reprieve from an onslaught of judgment oracles leading up to the precise event of the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem on a particular day, the ninth of Ab in the year 587 BCE.

Opening with a formula typical of salvation oracles, “the days are surely coming,” verse 14 introduces divine first-person speech. God is assuring the audience that God will fulfill “the promise,” literally “the good word” with a definite article—not “a” promise, one of many, but a particular one made to both the house of Israel and the house of Judah. Harkening back to Jeremiah 23:5–6, another eschatological interlude, verse 15 reiterates what was promised there, namely, that God will birth a “righteous” (*tsedaqah*) offspring of the Davidic monarchy, who will act in ways that will promote “justice and righteousness” (*mishpat* and *tsedaqah*). While some will read this as a contradiction in terms—the Davidic monarchy has been blamed throughout the book of Jeremiah for exploitation and unfaithfulness (see Jer. 2:4–8, 26–28; 3:6–10; 7:1–15; 21:11–12)—the focus on qualities associated with the Sinai covenant, justice, and righteousness, so central to the theology and worldview of Jeremiah, does constitute something radically new in light of the present realities of destruction and impending exile.

What was promised to both Israel and Judah narrows to a promise to Judah and Jerusalem in what follows in verse 16. Both in historical and in literary terms, this makes historical sense. The Babylonian exile occurs well

6. See, e.g., Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah*.

7. See Angela Bauer, *Gender in the Book of Jeremiah: A Feminist-Literary Reading* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999).

after the fall of the northern kingdom, so Judah and Jerusalem are at the center of the events leading up to it. Literarily, paralleling the house of Israel and the house of Judah with Judah and Jerusalem serves the movement from the bigger picture to what is at hand, the giving of a new name to the people, personified in Jerusalem. This new name is a confession of faith “YHWH is our righteousness (*tsedaqah*).” So whenever anybody utters the name of the Holy City, the person confesses his faith in the God of the covenant at Sinai. The proclamation goes even further. Given the power associated with naming in ancient Israel, giving someone or something a new name means changing them existentially. That is to say, a radical new reality is here proclaimed: the city and its people will live faithfully within the Sinai covenant by embodying its fundamental principles, justice and righteousness.

As a theological claim, such a promise goes even deeper as the new reality of a just, fair, and righteous government embraces competing theological trajectories in the First Testament—integrating the Zion covenant within the Sinai covenant.<sup>8</sup> This promise also fits with the more orthodox Jeremican prophecies in particular (see Jer. 16:14–21; 23:5–8; 30:2–9; 31:1–6, 21–26, 31–34). At the same time, it joins the visions of a different way of living together as a divided people after the exile, beyond former allegiances and worldviews (see, e.g., Isa. 51:19; 54:1–17; 56:1–8; 61:1–11; Zech. 6:9–15).

By focusing on these three verses during the First Sunday of Advent, the lectionary invites the preacher and congregation to draw analogies between Jeremiah’s world and contemporary dynamics locally and globally. Instances of death, destruction, and exile abound, yet particularity is encouraged. The preacher who follows the assigned text and stops with verse 16, not including the remainder of chapter 33, will want to use caution not to forget Judah’s concrete historical circumstances. Jeremiah’s audience is a people facing impending exile or already suffering in it. Jeremiah offers that people a vision of a radically new way their political and religious institutions may work in the future. The new generation of Davidic kings will act in ways that promote justice and righteousness, rather than exploitation, self-promotion, and violence. Further, even the Levitical priesthood will live according to the Sinai covenant, rather than continue their insistence on their own orthodoxies at the expense of inclusion, justice, and righteousness in faith and religious observance. Both king and priest someday may embody and lead the way into God’s bright new reality.

Leaving out the grim present reality of soon-to-be exiles allows for a too

8. See Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985).

facile connection of the passage with the New Testament readings, which, while also eschatological in nature, presuppose a different historical context. The challenge and promise of grappling with this passage in the book of Jeremiah on the First Sunday of Advent lies in its contemporary echoes in the power structures of our time.

ANGELA BAUER-LEVESQUE

### HOMILETICAL PERSPECTIVE

The season of Advent is puzzling to many Christians. The stories read during this season are, by and large, not childhood favorites. They have no star in the east guiding devout magi, no soliloquy of angels stirring shepherds to go and see the babe, no harried innkeeper, no touching moment when Mary ponders these things in her heart.

The stories of Advent are dug from the harsh soil of human struggle and the littered landscape of dashed dreams. They are told from the vista where sin still reigns supreme and hope has gone on vacation. Many prefer the major notes of joy and gladness in the Christmas stories to the minor keys of Advent.

Advent also leaves us dizzy over time. Advent is not a steady, constant, “time marches on” kind of time, a persistent drumbeat of day after day, year after year. Advent is unpredictable time, unsteady time. In this time-tumbling season, we look for a baby to be born while we know that the baby has already been born, and still is being born in us—this Emmanuel who came and is coming and is among us right now. Not only is Advent not well behaved, neat, and orderly; it contorts time. Given the nature of Advent, it is no surprise that Jeremiah is its herald.

Jeremiah speaks to hostages being seduced to start a new life in balmy Babylon. He tells a tough audience that, despite every sign to the contrary, “days are coming,” days when God’s promises will be fulfilled. Jeremiah tells his kin that God’s future will come not by giving up on God’s promises and making the best of a bad situation—after all, “when in Babylon”—but by trusting in the creative and redemptive and sure purposes of God: “Days are coming!”

With the world that he has known crumbling around him, Jeremiah pushes his people to see a future, God’s future, which seems laughable given the current circumstances. No wonder Jeremiah is the church’s usher into Advent. Later in the season, Mary will sing about God’s future, despite her own laughable circumstance.

Along with Jeremiah and Mary, preachers would do well to consider

another Advent singer. Heidi Neumark is a Lutheran pastor who writes about this holy season amid her ministry in the roughest part of the Bronx:

Probably the reason I love Advent so much is that it is a reflection of how I feel most of the time. I might not feel sorry during Lent, when the liturgical calendar begs repentance. I might not feel victorious, even though it is Easter morning. I might not feel full of the Spirit, even though it is Pentecost and the liturgy spins out fiery gusts of ecstasy. But during Advent, I am always in sync with the season.

Advent unfailingly embraces and comprehends my reality. And what is that? I think of the Spanish word *anhelo*, or longing. Advent is when the church can no longer contain its unfulfilled desire and the cry of *anhelo* bursts forth: Maranatha! Come Lord Jesus! O Come, O Come, Emmanuel!<sup>9</sup>

As the first, lone candle of Advent wreath burns, Jeremiah recalls his own city burning, and yet he speaks not of destruction but of God's future as he offers his cry of longing, of *anhelo*. Like Jeremiah, most preachers have their own list for which they cry *anhelo*, and they serve people with their own lists of longings, for which they cry *anhelo*.

As I listen to the cries of Jeremiah throughout the scope of his prophecy, I long for the day that is surely coming when God's future will be a reality beyond the violent boastings of the ruling Babylon of the day. I long for the day that is surely coming when in God's future the poor are not sent to shelters or forced to sleep on the streets. I long for the day that is surely coming when God's future has no space for violence, when we will stop producing body bags—because there are no dead soldiers to fill them. I long for the day that is surely coming when God's future affords no room for rancor, a day when our world is no longer torn asunder by racism and sexism and homophobia.

Preaching Advent from the perspective of Jeremiah, I long for the confidence of the prophet's words about the righteous future of our God. I long for people to know the God whom Jeremiah heralds and whom Jesus will incarnate, not a hidden God who refuses to traffic in the human enterprise, but a God who hears God's people when they cry *anhelo*. I long for people to know, not the God of religious fanatics or bigots, not a God who enjoys seeing Jerusalem set afire, but the God who, in God's own time, will bring more mercy and justice than we will ever grasp.

9. Heidi Neumark, *Breathing Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 211.

As preachers consider the prophecy from Jeremiah, maybe there is no more important homiletical clue to preaching this text than to pay attention to the *anhelo* within them and around them. Maybe, then, Jeremiah is the best biblical voice to lead us into Advent, the season that brings *anhelo* to expression.

In many liturgical traditions, the First Sunday of Advent brings the community to the holy Table. In many ways, Jeremiah's promise that "days are coming" finds its most poignant meaning at this table of *anhelo*. Just look at it. This meal does not point to magi and a star, but to a world gone mad. It is a table not cloaked in romance and sweet memories, but set with food paid for at a price way too dear. It is not just a table of *anhelo*, it is *the* table of *anhelo* for all with deep longings, people who pray with Jeremiah for the days that are surely coming.

Maybe Advent is not so puzzling after all.

GARY W. CHARLES

### *Luke 21:5–19*

#### THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Here we are invited not to be terrified (v. 9). This is possible because of the promises of God in Christ that "not a hair of your head will perish" (v. 18) and "by your endurance you will gain your souls" (v. 19). Thus we are allowed to be quietly and confidently safe in a hand that carries us. Still, it is certainly astonishing that these words are found in the biblical text for today; it is a text that is full of bad news, full of reasons that could make us timid and hopeless.

What is described in this text is similar to what happens in the wind-storm that is reported to us in Matthew 8:24–26. The disciples of Jesus, together with their Master, run into the deadly danger of tempestuous waves upon the sea. As the disciples panic, Jesus lies in the boat sleeping, a sign of the heavenly peace that cannot be destroyed by any fear. Likewise, in this text, the Savior gives the same assurance to us that he gave his disciples: Be not terrified! There shall not be a hair of your head that perishes!

Indeed, even today we cannot ignore Jesus' encouragement, because it is spoken to us in an equally dangerous situation. The ground upon which we live is tottering. Securities of which we thought highly are breaking all around us. Are the words of Jesus only for the ancient world of long ago? If we think about it, we discover that Jesus' words are as relevant now as they were 2,000 years ago.

Many wars have happened since the Second World War with its millions of dead! As armies continue to be extravagantly funded, there are always new reasons to feel threatened. “Revolutions” today are called terrorism. There are “earthquakes” on the stock exchange. The polar region is melting. We are plagued by pandemics—will humans die of a virus against which we are defenseless? There are famines—great numbers of humans cannot be supplied with bread and water; do not the requirements of rich countries deprive poor countries of the possibilities for feeding themselves? Even with all the progress in 2,000 years, there are disadvantages, and do not these disadvantages have more and more of a global effect?

What can we do? An old and always new answer in such a situation says, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die” (Isa. 22:13; 1 Cor. 15:32). Do not a majority of privileged humans speak in this way today, even with the dangers of a global collapse? Such thinking is an egoistic flight from reality. Jesus shows us quite another approach in our biblical text. He says, “Not a hair of your head will perish.”

In this sentence he says with cheerful confidence that our salvation lies always in good hands, in God’s hands. Where there is such confidence, we are given the endurance by which we gain our souls. Such endurance requires patience, not the laziness of persons who do nothing more than “eat and drink.” As legend has it, when Martin Luther was asked what he would do if he learned the world were coming to an end, he said, “If tomorrow is the Day of Judgment, then today I want to plant an apple tree.”

The most evil danger is still to be highlighted. Worse than wars and earthquakes is what Jesus warns in verse 8: “Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and, ‘The time is near!’ Do not go after them.” A couple of images come to mind to illustrate Jesus’ warning. A man who follows a false prophet is like a man in a plunge holding on to a seemingly secure rope, but it tears. It is like a beggar dying of starvation who receives bread, but discovers that it is in fact stone. In other words, there are persons who can tell others persuasively about Christ, but we must heed the urgent warning of the real Jesus Christ, who says, “Do not listen to those so-called preachers in my name. Do not follow them. They seem to save from ruin, but in fact they lead to it.”

The Russian writer Dostoevsky has written a dismaying story with the title “The Grand Inquisitor.” It concerns an old cardinal of the Christian church who hears that the real Jesus has come suddenly to his town, where he has healed a blind man and raised a young girl from the dead. When the cardinal sees this, he asks him: “Why, then, have you come to interfere with us?” The cardinal would like to burn him at a funeral pyre as the most evil



of all heretics, because what he did long ago is done far better by the church today. The church does not need him, even if it is called by his name. However, the cardinal does say: “Go and do not come again . . . do not come at all . . . never, never!” And he lets him out into the dark ‘square of the city.’”<sup>10</sup> Dostoevsky illustrates this sentence of Jesus: “Many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he!’ . . . Do not go after them” (v. 8).

What can help us in the face of such an earnest threat? It is important that we live by what is said at the beginning of this essay. In the face of such threat, there is no technique that we may learn from Jesus and put into practice by ourselves. Our help is from the Helper himself. Jesus gives us the promise that he watches over us so that “not a hair of [our] head will perish” (v. 18). Without him holding our hands, we would be lost or like that apparently pious cardinal. While our Lord holds us, we are able to cling to him and to his word: “So make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict” (vv. 14–15).

EBERHARD BUSCH

## PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

Every generation, at some time in its history, has thought its time was the end of time—and the dawn of the twenty-first century has been no exception. The current generation can reflect upon experiences of war, natural disaster, and political chaos as fodder for apocalyptic possibility.

Most people remember where they were and what they were doing on September 11, 2001, when nineteen terrorists associated with Al-Qaeda hijacked four commercial airline jets. The sight of hundreds of military tanks streaming across the desert toward Baghdad as part of the “shock and awe” campaign is emblazoned on the American imagination. On December 26, 2004, the world was startled by a tsunami in Indonesia, one of the deadliest natural disasters in history. Many people have vivid memories of news footage from New Orleans during and after Hurricane Katrina. While it is not clear that these and other phenomena are in any way apocalyptic (only God knows the end time), Jesus’ directions to the disciples concerning what they ought to do in times of chaos and destruction were quite challenging then, and are equally challenging for us today.

In Luke 21:5–6 Jesus speaks of the destruction of the temple, prompting the disciples to ask two questions: When? What will be the sign? Jesus

10. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Everyone’s Library, 1992), 250 and 262.

goes on to describe three things that will happen in the future (vv. 8–11): imposters will come and try to trick the faithful; war and conflict will rage on; and natural disasters will be prevalent. Jesus assures the disciples that the end times are in the future and that they will not happen all at once. Then Jesus says a rather peculiar thing in verse 13: “This will give you an opportunity to testify.”

He goes on to tell the disciples that their testimony must not be rehearsed or “canned.” Instead, they should rely on the incontestable wisdom that will be given them in the moment. Jesus says that the reward for their testimony and their endurance of these catastrophic times will be the gaining of their very souls. Let us reflect on Jesus’ peculiar statement about suffering as opportunity for testimony.

What kind of testimony does a faithful person give in the face of death, betrayal, and the execution of loved ones? Most of us are accustomed to testimonies that praise God for good times, good things, blessings of redemption, healing, rescue, and salvation. Testimony is usually reserved for the stories that declare how God brought the faithful out of slavery into freedom, how God made a way when there was no way; how God acted to save a distressed people. The peculiar words of Jesus in this passage, however, tell us that when we experience destruction, betrayal, and loss, we are to see these times as opportunities to testify. What kind of testimony does one give in the face of great suffering and great hatred?

“Suffering always means pain, disruption, separation, and incompleteness,” writes Shawn Copeland. “It can render us powerless and mute, push us to the borders of hopelessness and despair.”<sup>11</sup> The opportunity to testify during times of destruction is, in part, the audacity to muster courage in the face of fear, the boldness to speak in the face of suffering. Great suffering changes some people and defeats others, but for those who endure—their very souls are gained.

Suffering provides an opportunity for those who have been changed to tell of their hope. For some, the change brought about by suffering is tangible, literal, physical. Howard Thurman, brilliant African American theologian, has seen suffering change people: “Into their faces come a subtle radiance and a settled serenity; into their relationships a vital generosity that opens the sealed doors of the heart in all who are encountered along the way.”<sup>12</sup>

11. M. Shawn Copeland, “Wading through Many Sorrows: Toward a Theology of Suffering in Womanist Perspective,” in *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 109.

12. Howard Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit* (1963; Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1977), 76.

An opportunity for testimony born out of a time of loss, grief, and chaos is recorded in the song “Precious Lord,” written by Thomas Dorsey. Thomas Dorsey, born in 1889 in rural Georgia, was a prolific songwriter and an excellent gospel and blues musician. While a young man, Dorsey moved to Chicago and found work as a piano player in the churches as well as in clubs and playing in theatres. Struggling to support his family, Dorsey divided his time between playing in the clubs and playing in the church. After some time of turbulence, Dorsey devoted his artistry exclusively to the church.

In August of 1932, Dorsey left his pregnant wife in Chicago and traveled to be the featured soloist at a large revival meeting in St. Louis. After the first night of the revival, Dorsey received a telegram that simply said, “Your wife just died.” Dorsey raced home and learned that his wife had given birth to a son before dying in childbirth. The next day his son died as well. Dorsey buried his wife and son in the same casket and withdrew in sorrow and agony from his family and friends. He refused to compose or play any music for quite some time.

While still in the midst of despair, Dorsey said that as he sat in front of a piano, a feeling of peace washed through him. He heard a melody in his head that he had never heard before and began to play it on the piano. That night, Dorsey recorded this testimony while in the midst of suffering:

Precious Lord, take my hand,  
Lead me on, let me stand;  
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn;  
Through the storm, through the night,  
Lead me on to the light;  
Take my hand, precious Lord,  
Lead me home.<sup>13</sup>

NANCY LYNNE WESTFIELD

## EXEGETICAL PERSPECTIVE

***The Jerusalem Temple, Worldly Turmoil, and Persecution.*** As the scene opens, Jesus engages in public dialogue with people about the beautiful Jerusalem temple (vv. 5–7). As it continues, Jesus presents a monologue about future times of false leadership, violence, and suffering (vv. 8–11), about arrest, persecution, and endurance (vv. 12–19), and about destruction of Jerusalem that signals the eventual coming of the Son of Man (vv. 20–36).

13. Thomas A. Dorsey, “Precious Lord, Take My Hand,” in *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 404. See also [http://www.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/people/thomas\\_dorsey.html](http://www.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/people/thomas_dorsey.html) (PBS—*This Far by Faith: Series on People of Faith—Thomas Dorsey*).

***Future Destruction of the Temple (vv. 5–6).*** The magnificent temple in Jerusalem during the lifetime of Jesus was the result of a rebuilding project started by King Herod in 19 BCE. Herod more than doubled the size of the Temple Mount. People could gather in large colonnades or porches around the Temple Mount for various purposes, including speech making and healing (see Acts 3:11; 5:12). While the temple itself was completed in eighteen months, work on the outer courts and decorations continued throughout Jesus’ lifetime until 62–64 CE.

Less than a decade after everything was completed on the Herodian temple, it was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE. The descriptive language in Luke 21:5 exhibits widespread knowledge of its beauty and magnificence. After its destruction, people knew about its magnificence all the way to Rome, as a result of the exhibition of the plundered furnishings and the large paintings of the events of the Roman siege and burning of Jerusalem that were paraded on wagons in a triumphal procession in Rome in 71 CE (Josephus, *Wars* 7.3–5). In the Gospels, the destruction is described as “not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down” (v. 6). When Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed in 70 CE, Christians considered this a confirmation of a prediction Jesus had made during his lifetime.

***False Leadership (vv. 7–8).*** During the time leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem, many people either took action to defy the governing powers or were suspected of doing so and were destroyed by Herodian or Roman soldiers. A current Web site lists fifteen leaders between 4 BCE and 70 CE who were perceived to have defied the Romans and were destroyed.<sup>14</sup> Verse 8 quotes Jesus as saying that the appearance of various leaders, some claiming to be Jesus or at least divine (“I am he!”) and some predicting the end of time, will be the first sign that the destruction of the Jerusalem temple will soon take place (v. 7). Luke’s Gospel presupposes that the appearance of various leaders who were captured, imprisoned, and/or killed confirmed Jesus’ view of events that would happen before the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple.

***War and World Turbulence (vv. 9–11).*** After Jesus warns about people who will come to lead them astray, he describes terrible events that grow ever greater in magnitude. In the Lukan account, these are not “the beginnings of the birth pangs” (Matt. 24:8; Mark 13:8). Rather, these events represent

14. [http://www.livius.org/men-mh/messiah/messianic\\_claimants00.html](http://www.livius.org/men-mh/messiah/messianic_claimants00.html). The list of fifteen includes Jesus.

the turmoil that will increase until the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. First there will be wars and insurrections (v. 9). This may refer to the rapid succession of four Roman emperors in 69 CE prior to the siege and destruction of Jerusalem. Second, nations and kingdoms will rise up against one another (v. 10). Instead of making this warfare a transition to end-time events (cf. Matt. 24:7; Mark 13:8), the Lukan account makes it the next step in the process that leads to the attack on Jerusalem. Third, there will be great earthquakes, and in some places famines and plagues (v. 11a). Luke's own account of the time between Jesus and the destruction of Jerusalem presents a famine in the time of Claudius (Acts 11:28; ca. 47 CE) and an earthquake in Philippi (Acts 16:26; ca. 50 CE). Fourth, "there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven" (v. 11b). Scholars have noticed that Josephus's account of a star resembling a sword and a comet at the burning of the Jerusalem temple (*War* 6.289) is similar to the conclusion of the Lukan sequence of events. Jesus' speech in Luke, then, focuses first on the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, rather than on the end of time.

***Arrest, Persecution, Hatred, and Endurance (vv. 12–19).*** In Luke's account, Jesus does not present suffering and persecution as part of the tribulations that lead up to the end time (cf. Matt. 24:9–14; Mark 13:9–13). Rather, Jesus says that arrests, persecution, trials, betrayal by family members, and hatred against them will all occur before the sequence of turmoil that leads to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple (v. 12), which the author knows occurred in 70 CE, about twenty years before he wrote his Gospel. This means that verses 12–19 refer to events like those one reads about in the Acts of the Apostles, which is the second volume Luke wrote sometime after completing the Gospel of Luke.

In Luke's historical theology, the time of the church is a time when people who endure will "gain [their] souls" (v. 19). Matthew 24:13 and Mark 13:13, in contrast, feature Jesus saying that those who endure to the end will be saved. The Lukan account has Jesus describe the destruction of Jerusalem in terms close to the way it happened, namely, being "surrounded by armies" (v. 20) as Rome enacted "days of vengeance" against a rebellious population (v. 22). In a similar way, it has Jesus describe the sufferings and hardships of his followers in terms Luke uses in Acts. Jesus' followers will be arrested (v. 12a; cf. Acts 4:3; 5:18; 12:1; 21:27). They also will be "handed over" to authorities (v. 12b; cf. Acts 21:11; 28:17). They will testify before kings and governors (vv. 12–13; cf. Acts 24–26) and present wisdom that others will not be able to withstand (v. 15; cf. Stephen in Acts 6:10). In Luke's account of Jesus' speech, then, the emphasis in the initial part is not on the coming

of the end time but on events that happened in the lives of followers of Jesus through the time of the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple.

VERNON K. ROBBINS

### HOMILETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Luke's account of Jesus' teaching in 21:5–19 provides a cluttered text full of disorientation, dismaying ideas, and distractions aplenty.

The disciples begin distracted. They marvel at the beauty of the temple, the enormous stones of its walls, and the wealthy worshipers coming to dedicate their gifts. Small wonder they are distracted. The public exhibition of fabulous wealth has a way of distracting us, whether we see it in *Town and Country* or *People* magazine, and the temple was Herod's temple, the jewel in his architectural crown. The New Testament remembers Herod as a paranoid despot, but history and archaeologists remember him as a builder. In the church library there is probably a volume that includes an artist's rendering of Herod's temple. Look it up: you will be impressed too. Everyone was.

Perhaps not everyone. Jesus interrupts his disciples' distraction by hanging out a sign naming everything that so dazzles them as "Condemned Property." The enormous stones, beautiful, smooth, and apparently indestructible: "not one stone will be left upon another"; the glorious temple dedicated to a glorious God (but also filled with graft [20:47]): "all will be thrown down" (v. 8).

Writing sometime after the destruction of the temple, Luke characterizes Jesus as a reliable prophet whose words were proven true by historical events. Those who listen to him discover that all of Jesus' words are true, and therefore listeners can trust these words that threaten such dismaying dislocations.

Theologically Luke means to distinguish the end time of all things from particular historical events. The temple may have come to an end, but that is not *the* end; peace will come to an end and be swallowed by war, but war is not the way the world ends; security will end, shaken in earthquakes, but fear and uncertainty are not the end either. People will try to mimic Jesus and misuse his name attempting to prophesy as he did, but the world does not end with truth's impersonators. "Dreadful portents and great signs from heaven" (v. 11) may tempt you to play prophet yourself, reading the concealed meanings of mysterious happenings, but knowing the end does not belong to you (cf. Acts 1:7; 1 Thess. 5:1–11). Theologically Luke no doubt has an important point to make, but rhetorically he frightens his readers to their wits' ends.

Wars, insurrections, earthquakes, famine, plagues, and, just when it seems it cannot possibly get any worse, it gets personal: *You* will be arrested, *you* will be persecuted, *you* will be thrown into prison and hauled before the authorities. Then, Jesus says, then you will have them right where you want them. They will have to listen to you. Just when everything looks so dark, when falsehood appears so persuasive, when war seems everlasting and inevitable, when the earth trembles beneath you, when you are forced to account for yourself, you have “an opportunity to testify” (v. 13).

This rambling, discombobulated directory of events—wars, earthquakes, famine—these are not random happenings, nor are they reliable signs of the end, but they are things that *must* first happen in the grand design of God’s redemption (v. 9, the divine imperative *dei*: “these things *must* take place first”). We had not noticed the plan. The sheer immensity of wars, earthquakes, famine, and plagues so completely arrests our attention that we seldom look for something even more overwhelming. In Jesus’ vision, however, these dramatic historical events are simply a required stage setting for the great drama of speaking God’s truth.

Given the towering backdrop of wars, earthquakes, and famine, we might assume we do not have much to say. Moreover, arrest, persecution, and arraignment notoriously intimidate and silence people. Everything, however, is working according to plan, God’s plan: “This will give you an opportunity to testify” (v. 13). If we must speak we should like some time to prepare, to consult perhaps a volume like this and to arrange our thoughts, but Jesus dismisses our anxiety as unnecessary. Our powerlessness to speak may be our most essential qualification.

For those who do not know what to say at a crucial moment, conventional wisdom provides maxims like “Don’t worry, it will come to you!” and “You’ll be just fine; you’ll think of something at the last moment!” Those folk anodynes are precisely what Jesus does not offer those compelled to speak. Instead, he promises them, “I will give you words.” The words we have to say we receive as a gift. Christ possesses a wisdom our troubled world and his troubling opponents cannot calculate or comprehend. Although they have rejected his words before, once again Christ will speak the word of the kingdom through his church.

Christ promises to speak the word, which is to say we do not have to create these words. The word we are given is the word that created all things in the beginning (Gen. 1:3; John 1:1–3) and continues to create in its speaking. We do not speak with confidence but rather out of our speaking and hearing ourselves bear testimony we receive the gift of faith: “Faith comes from what

is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ” (Rom. 10:17). Such is the power of Jesus’ words that they not only describe a kingdom but fashion a habitable place. The disclosures of Luke 21:5–19 take their own opportunity to testify to this.

Just as the destruction of the temple testified to the truthfulness of Jesus’ words when the Gospel of Luke was written, so do these words spoken in the worship of Christian communities bear witness to Christ’s unshakable promise. They are only words, small breaths of air spoken millennia ago, but these words endure with power, even power to “gain your souls” (v. 19). The temple is destroyed, not one stone left on another. The Roman Empire collapsed into history. These words endure, and their promise is not diminished by earthquake, war, or famine—or even by the passing of years.

PATRICK J. WILLSON