

The Rev. Shelley Ryan
St. Luke's Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
The First Sunday of Advent – November 28 & 29, 2015
Jeremiah 33:14-16, Luke 21:25-36

Well, it's that time of year again. You can just feel it in the air and we are reminded of it when we go on the internet to check our emails. At least I'm reminded of it as the endless advertisements from Amazon, hayneedle, and, my personal favorite, retailmenot, fill my inbox. They advertise black Friday sales, post black Friday sales, one day sales, blow out sales, and the list goes on. As I scroll through the exhaustive list of emails, I occasionally come across a come across some emails that I actually enjoy reading. I subscribe to a few blogs that focus on prayerful devotion and contemplative Christianity. Sometimes I'm tempted to skip over them, because I'm just too busy to read them. But when I do open them up to them, almost without fail, I am rewarded with an experience of a feeling of peace and centeredness. It's like finding a gem in the midst of rugged stones. When I allow myself to slow down, center my mind to meditate on the inspirational words from scripture, and prayer. It's like a breath of fresh air as I experience a sense of centeredness and peace amidst the chaos and demands of the busy holiday season.

As we begin the season of advent, allow me to take a moment to contrast the season of holiday gift-giving and festivities to the season of Advent. Some might say that Advent is somewhat incongruent with the festive holiday season, and well... they might be right. I mean, all we have to do is reflect on the readings from Jeremiah and Luke's gospel today! The readings address the 'end times' and the 'coming day of the Lord' or the 'Messianic Age.' Our gospel reading for today is actually an excerpt from the apocalyptic discourse of Jesus. The messages don't exactly address the festive and joyful theme of festal joy, do they? It's preferable for us to

focus on holiday festivities and Christmas cheer than to ponder eschatological scripture during the season of Advent, and this is only to be expected. So why does the lectionary focus this first Sunday of Advent on readings that foreshadow eschatological, or ‘the doctrine of last things’ themes? For Christians, the holy season of Advent is significant, in that the observance anticipates the coming of Christ from two different perspectives. The season offers us the opportunity to share in the ancient longing for the coming of the Messiah, and to be alert for his Second coming.

Unlike the stressors and demands placed upon us by a consumer-driven culture, that often results in immediate gratification, the season of Advent presents a strong contrast, as reflect, we anticipate and we wait. The word Advent is derived from the Latin word *Adventus*, which is the translation of the Greek word *Parousia* – which is defined as the ‘second coming of Christ’, or according to the Greek New Testament Lexicon meaning ‘presence’ or ‘the coming.’ We observe a season of ‘already, but not yet’ in that God’s kingdom has come in the person of Jesus, the Christ child, God incarnate, and we look toward the perfect kingdom as we await His return to earth.

We must remain patient and mindful as we experience a sort tension in living the already, but not yet. Simply put it’s preferable for us to want to indulge ourselves in the busy and fun festivities of the holiday season, rather than to still our thoughts and quiet our minds as we focus and contemplate the second coming of Christ. It can be an extraordinary challenge for many of us to simply be still, to quiet our minds, to truly listen. Now I am certainly not implying that the holiday season isn’t filled with joy, and love, and many good things. In fact it is this time of year when charitable giving is at its best, reunions with family and friends bring about tremendous joy and celebration, beautiful lights illuminate homes, streets, and buildings, and we enjoy seeing

smiles on the faces of those we love as they open that special gift. But, in a matter of time the lights and the Christmas trees will come down, the novelty of the perfect gift will fade away, and common 'life' will once again resume. Yet, there is one gift, one gem that will remain present. This gift cannot be purchased, it is not measurable, quantifiable or even tangible, but the gift is profound. It is the gift called HOPE. As we light our first candle of Advent, we refer to the candle as the candle of HOPE, or as the prophecy candle. Just as the prophet Jeremiah challenged people to turn away from their wicked ways and from reliance on idols and false gods and to return to their covenantal loyalty to Yahweh/God – may we be reminded to step back from the preponderance of activities to focus on energies upon HOPE and the preparation of the coming of Christ.

We can discover this hope when we celebrate the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, as we are nourished by the HOPE of God's coming and we are participating in God's future. Jeremiah's promise and proclamation that the days are coming call us to the holy table, as this is where we come closest to the presence of Christ. The Holy Eucharist brings us intimately close with Jesus as we receive the gifts of God that provide us with hope, nourishment, and spiritual refreshment for the journey. We are joined together through Him, as the body of Christ as we profess "We remember his death, we proclaim his resurrection, and we await the day of his coming in glory." When we take part in the holy meal, we are strengthened to continue the journey, while living fully in the present but being fully assured of what is yet to be – the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We can rejoice in this knowingness, this assuredness of HOPE of what is to come, as we concurrently celebrate the season of Advent and the season of holiday festivities. And may I encourage each of us, to hold fast to the gem amongst the rugged stones, by taking moments in

time to center ourselves, to quiet our minds, and to pray as we long to discover the holiness of the Advent season.

I leave you with an Advent prayer from the late Henri Nouwen, which I find to be appropriate for the beginning of Advent, and a season that can tend to be so frantic. May our heavenly Father help us to quiet our hearts and truly listen for His voice each day, as we put away all anxious thoughts and distractions.

Lord Jesus, Master of both light and darkness; send your Holy Spirit upon our preparations for Christmas. We who have so much to do seek quiet spaces to hear your voice each day. We who are anxious over many things look forward to your coming among us. We who are blessed in so many ways long for the complete joy of your kingdom. We whose hearts are heavy seek the joy of your presence. We are your people, walking in the darkness, yet seeking the light. To you we say “Come Lord Jesus!”

Amen.