Signs and Comings of Christ

November 28, 2021, Advent I

Jeremiah 33: 14-16

Luke 21: 25-36

This past summer and fall we have witnessed severe drought and heat domes, devastating wild fires, atmospheric rivers bringing massive volumes of rain, and most recently creating flooding and landslides in BC (exacerbated by the wildfires) and now also in Atlantic Canada that has closed roads and changed geography of whole areas. Some of these events are so dramatic that they can take our breath away when we see the images or hear about them. These may be the kinds of signs (in the sun, the moon, the stars) that Jesus names in our gospel reading today, that cause people to faint from fear, which in the Hebrew really means take our breath away. It doesn’t necessarily mean that the second coming is imminent but it is something to be alert and aware of as we enter this time of Advent, which is a season of preparing for the coming of Christ breaking into our lives and the world.

As we begin Advent, we begin a new season in the church year, which includes hearing readings from the Gospel of Luke over the next year. Luke’s primary message is built around the theme of salvation. But it is not the kind of salvation that the contemporary American church has defined in the last century of personal, individual salvation. Luke’s concept of salvation is far, far richer than that. According to Luke, salvation is not only personal and individual, but it is also social, corporate, even cosmic. The biblical understanding of salvation is that it is both individual and corporate, private and systemic, both human-focused and environmental, both for people and for the political, economic and religious systems of society, for the city, the nation, the world, and even the universe. The symbol Jesus uses to describe both God’s intentions for Israel and the ‘new Israel’ the emerging church, is the symbol of “Jubilee”. Jubilee is legislation based in Deuteronomy and Leviticus intentionally created to redistribute wealth. This is the practice of clearing the debts of all every 50 years so no one is owed anyone, and no one accumulates too much wealth. What happened that we have lost this important practice? With the announcement Jesus makes in Luke 4, to bring good news to the poor, release the oppressed, set the captives free, and bring sight to the blind, declaring the year of the Lords favour (Jubilee), Jesus places Israel’s leadership on notice that his coming is God’s action to reverse Israelite society so that wealth and power cannot be built up in their hands while all the rest of the people are thrust ever deeper into poverty. The Messiah is here to bring in the jubilee.

Our advent passage in Luke starts not with Jesus’ beginning but near the end of his life as he prepares for his inevitable trial and crucifixion. In this passage, Jesus describes the culmination of the clash between those who join with Jesus in proclaiming the salvation that creates a Jubilee people, and the systems and people of society that battle such a world because they want to remain dominant, exploitive and oppressive. He reminds his followers that this will happen quickly and that it will not be easy, there will be resistance from the systems as they seek to live out justice and righteousness.

Justice and righteousness are the themes in the Jeremiah passage. Jeremiah lived in a time that was devastating to the Israelites. Jerusalem and the temple had been destroyed and they were exiled to Babylon. Most of Jeremiah’s prophecies were very pessimistic and filled with woe but this section we read from today is one of the rays of hope in the book. Jeremiah declares that God will act on behalf of Israel’s distress and that action will bring them a branch of David, new life that will deliver them and create among them God’s chosen people in the world. Christians have understood this branch to be Jesus. This branch comes as a small shoot from a dead stump and grows to become a lush and flourishing tree, the Jesse tree - Jesse being David’s father. This branch will execute Justice and righteousness in the land. Both of these connect with our modern day understanding of social justice, fairness, equity, compassion and mercy. This biblical righteousness is very different from what we might understand righteousness to be today. It is not about being right or virtuous in the personal sense but is about right action and fair dealing between people, with a particular commitment to righting the wrongs that cause people to be poor, marginalized or needy. It doesn’t simply mean equality of everyone before the Law, but rather an intentional and preferential commitment toward the poor that would tend to make one rule in their favor whenever possible. Thus, this root of Jesse, of David is all about creating a just community, and rooting out injustice.

As we consider the needs of our world following the COP26 meeting and its failure to have strong enough language to end coal production and use – phasing down unabated coal or coal which does not capture emissions from burning – we have places like the German Rhenish coal mining region that is demolishing villages including historic church communities for coal mine expansion. While a [2019 article](https://www.cleanenergywire.org/news/church-near-hambach-forest-prepared-demolition-make-room-coal-mine) identified that a “government-appointed commission agreed that coal-fired power production in Germany should end no later than 2038, several villages in coal mining areas are still slated for demolition to allow coal mine expansion for the time being”. Churches and villages are still being destroyed today.

There is much injustice and crisis to despair about. In the midst of these harsh realities and Jesus’ harsh message, there is hope. In verse 31, Jesus reminds us that the Kingdom of God is near. God is with us, Christ is with us and in us. The information about the Churches being destroyed in Germany came in an e-mail from an organization called [GreenFaith](https://greenfaith.org/), a multi-faith grassroots organization fighting for climate justice. There is hope, we are not alone.

I came across a quote by Michael Joseph Brown, who at the time worked with the AIDS Survival Project in Atlanta. It can be a meaningful quote for us in the midst of our present pandemic and we could change HIV/AIDS to COVID. He points out: “It would be easy to become cynical about the slow rate of progress in our world, especially when it comes to pandemics like HIV/AIDS. Millions around the world are affected by this devastating disease, and even in the United States the spread of HIV/AIDS among marginalized communities is relentless. I remain hopeful, however, because just when I think we have reached the end of our rope, God raises up allies and additional resources from unexpected places.”

God raises up allies from unexpected places. God is with us, in us, and through us. Too often we may be looking for help from an external God but God provides us with all kinds of support and hope through medical breakthroughs like the vaccines and medications for all kinds of disease and illness; through the support of people around us, individuals, friends, family, professionals; through the blessings of activists who push us to wake up to injustice and change our ways. The list goes on and on. Whole groups of people provide us with hope and perseverance which helps us get through difficult times.

In the last chapter in the Craft/Study book, See No Stranger by Valarie Kaur, she talks about transition in relation to labour and giving birth. Transition is actually a medical term of that final stage of birthing labor which is the most dangerous and most painful. She says, “transition feels like dying but it is the stage that precedes the birth of new life. After my labour, I began to think about transition as a metaphor for the most difficult fiery moments in our lives.” She says there are times that are so painful that we want to give up but in the midst of it, we can also find the depths of our courage, our deepest wisdom and transition to the other side. As we move through difficult times, we draw on our deepest sources of strength and love to find that wisdom and courage to transition to new life and hope.

The branch of David, the branch of justice and righteousness transitions and flourishes into a great bush, a great cloud of witnesses who have come before us, who are with us, and are yet to come. People like Peter, Paul, Luke, Mark, John, the Church Fathers, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, St. Francis, Ghandi, Martin Luther King Jr, Dorothy Day, Mother Theresa, Brian McLaren and so many more who are there to sustain us through and give us hope.

This gospel passage is about the Second Coming of Jesus, which the authors thought would happen soon, but we are still waiting or maybe it was the resurrection or Pentecost. Or maybe it is every day, when we encounter Christ in others. I wonder if the important part of the message for us now, is not so much when or whether Christ is coming but how we experience Christ coming in our lives every day.

I close with an advent poem by Ann Weems *The Coming of God*

“Our God is the One who comes to us

in a burning bush,

in an angel’s song,

in a newborn child.

Our God is the One who cannot be found

locked in the church,

not even in the sanctuary.

Our God will be where God will be

with no constraints,

no predictability.

Our God lives where our God lives,

and destruction has no power

and even death cannot stop the living.

Our God will be born where God will be born,

but there is no place to look for the One who comes to us.

When God is ready

God will come

even to a godforsaken place

like a stable in Bethlehem.

Watch …

for you know not when

God comes.

Watch, that you might be found

whenever

wherever

God comes.”