

Sermon Notes: December 1, 2024 (Advent 1) **Focus:** Advent: Watch and Hope
[Lectionary Readings](#)

Advent is weird. Some have already been gorging on Santa Claus and Bing Crosby since early November, but when you come to church in December there are stories of doom and the second coming. I hope to make a sense of that intentional, liturgical dissonance.

Personal confession time: Last time I went to Costco it was just after Halloween. I pulled out my oversized Costco cart and scanned myself into the store. Once in, the Christmas demon began nipping at my heels. If it were not for my shoestring budget, I would already have bought the bedazzled \$400 Teddy-bear-wearing-a-Santa-hat-while-holding-a-christmas-present with eleventy hundred led lights.

My checking balance finally convinced me that my front lawn did not *need* Teddy Santa to go up right after Halloween. You would think as an Episcopal priest, I would feel sanctimoniously above Christmas music and the red and green explosion that is the month of December – I am not.

December, Christmas and Advent carry a peculiar tension inside the Episcopal Church and other liturgically oriented churches. That is a *holy* tension which is *wholly* unresolved in United States. Our church proclaims tension between hope and judgment, between Christmas and Advent. This is foreign to the tensionless nostalgic promise of reindeer and sleighs. Christmas nostalgia and sparkle is not bad, but it is a woefully incomplete view of how Jesus is breaking into our world right now.

I believe that it is hard to fully embrace a Christian vision of Christmas without the preparation of Advent. I will jump back and forth between and the Old Testament and New Testament readings for this Sunday to explore Advent hope and be grateful for this intentional tension.

The Story of Redemption The more feel-good side of hope and redemption comes from Jeremiah's promise of a "righteous Branch":

I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will live in safety.

Despite Jeremiah's usual pessimism this passage holds a very rosy, hopeful future. Then, Luke anticipates Christ's second coming as the fulfilment of Jeremiah's messianic hope, and it is anything but rosy.

There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world.

Both readings circle around a larger narrative of redemption—Promise, Fulfillment, Completion – all of Advent describes this arc. Our cultural Christmas of easy nostalgia and pumpkin spiced Santas is not in December's lectionary.

Advent Exile and Promise In Jeremiah, the historical context is exile which is the reality of the people being kicked out of their homeland. Exile provokes a

longing within Judah for the promise of justice and restoration. If the people were separated from their homeland, how are they to make sense of the presence of God? (God is *supposed* to live on the land of Israel). Restoration will happen in later days and unexpected ways for Jeremiah.

In Luke, there is the same kind of different. A deep uncertainty plagues the fledgling, early church. The early disciples were confused about how to make sense of a crucified Messiah. After the state killing their hope, the church was on its own Exodus style journey to find a way out of exile and back home. The promise of hope was their polestar in dire circumstances and they were always on the lookout.

Advent Watchfulness and Fulfillment 1st Thessalonians is a nice addition to Luke and Jeremiah. It encourages us to remain strong in faith and holiness while Luke echoes this with a call to vigilance (“Be on guard...”). All three ask us to open our eyes to look around and to look up. Fulfillment is coming and, in some ways, already here.

Advent Righteousness Jeremiah’s “righteous Branch” points to justice and righteousness as divine gifts. These gifts straighten our spine and strengthen our resolve to make the world better. Thessalonians focuses on holiness and love as human expressions of righteousness. Righteousness is both a divine attribute (gift) and a human calling (response). Advent is a call to action.

Advent Apocalypse and Completion Luke’s signs are dark and frightening, but Jeremiah reminds us of God’s steadfast promise. Reading these texts as part a larger story help tie together the chaos of judgment and the fulfillment of God’s justice. *Hope is completing the story.*

Back to the Lectionary Jeremiah’s message of justice is a challenge to consider how God’s promises might inspire action against injustice now. Luke’s apocalyptic tone challenges complacency, calling for readiness and focus on eternal matters. 1st Thessalonians tries to shake us awake. How do these readings speak to our lives and world today?

All the pieces together Advent is a call to prepare ye the way. It also helps us grow more comfortable in our incomplete lives and trust that there is more to come. Personally, I have always felt a nagging sense of exile, but I trust that our redemption is iteratively better and one day will be complete. Until then, we can watch in hope. We can trust in the righteousness of God. Justice and reconciliation *will* have the last word.

Above all, never let go of the hope that God is making all things new. Do not tire in your watchfulness for the hope that is rising among us. Trust that God is preparing a true home for us, even if it is not quite here yet. Stay awake, look around, and love deeply. Merry Advent. **Todd**

P.S. If you really want to gorge on Santa right now, go for it. You will get no shade from me. If you get a bedazzled lawn ornament, go for it, but please just send me a picture so that I can live vicariously through you.