**Light the Candles** Rev. Dr. Scott M. Kenefake
First Sunday of Advent The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36 Saint Paul, Minnesota
December 1, 2024

To hear Andy Williams tell it, right now is the most wonderful time of year. It is also the most frantic and maddening time of year. We've commenced our shopping, decorating, and planning for the *"best Christmas ever."* Or maybe we're completely stressed and wringing our hands because we have no idea how we'll pull it off this year.

Church leaders, of course, aren't exempt from the frenetic pace by any means, because we've had Advent on our brains for some time already. We juggle the expectations of our congregations, the extra services and parties, the influx of worshipers who we may see only around this time of year. And oh yes, we have to plan our menus, do our shopping, and deck our halls like everyone else.

The signs are everywhere: *December 25 is coming.* Maybe this excites us, as we picture idyllic winter landscapes and family gatherings replete with laughter, gifts, crackling fires, and beautifully decked halls. Or perhaps we’re nervous, trying to figure out how to rob Peter to pay Paul so that we can afford the gifts under the tree. For some, this time of year magnifies the dysfunction of fractured families, the absence of warm family gatherings. Others grieve the recent (or not so recent) loss of a loved one who always made this time of year enjoyable, making their absence especially palpable. The signs are there to remind us of all these things.

In reality, (as Denise T. Anderson points out) it's the most *distracting* time of the year.

We spend so much of Advent preparing for Christmas that we forget to prepare for Christ's arrival. We neglect to prepare for the coming of the Lord and to consider what that means. We fail to stop and examine the existing paradigms and how they will be shifted and toppled at the Messiah's arrival.

Let’s consider these things in light of today’s scripture readings from Jeremiah and Luke:

Both Jeremiah and Jesus, separated by six centuries, stood on the streets of Jerusalem and announced its destruction. The announcement gave them no pleasure; it brought them both to tears. As Abraham Heschel said, *a prophet is one who knows what time it is.* Jeremiah knew that it was evening, time for Jerusalem’s inhabitants to relinquish their hold on illusory hopes—*alliances, piety and the pipe dreams of sunnier prophets*—all paper matches against the gathering dark. After a long and terrible night, said Jeremiah, a brilliant morning would dawn, and a generation of God’s people would wake up in safety in a place renamed *“justice.”*

When Jesus puts on the mantle of the prophet, he draws on prophetic imagery. Those in Jesus’ audience had ears for apocalyptic language. As an occupied, dispirited people who felt they were on the wrong side of history, they were fine with envisioning history’s end. Luke, whose audience knew the destruction of Jerusalem as a historical memory, took pains to separate Jesus’ words of warning about that event from his warnings about the eschatological travails to come. Luke, in fact, re-directs Jesus’ words to his followers in all times and places and sings the melody of Advent: whatever devastation you experience is neither permanent nor ultimate, for *“your redemption is drawing near.”*

In another way, though, the outlandish language of apocalypse—all that cosmic upheaval, all those heavenly signs—may be just right for conveying Jesus’ central message to folks like us. We are as likely as any people have ever been to be *“weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life.”* Add modernity and secularity to the mix, and we are prime candidates for having our closed, numb worlds shaken. As Flannery O’Connor, chronicler of grace-full shaking, put it, *“To the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind, you draw large and startling figures.”*

In the dullness of our half-lived lives, Jesus startles us into wakefulness. *“Stand up!” “Raise your heads!” “Look!” “Be alert!”* These are more than just tips for surviving into the eschaton. They are a summons to larger life in a world immune to the holy and incapable of imagining possibilities outside itself. As in all the Synoptic accounts (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) of this discourse, Jesus points to the fig tree, but in Luke he adds, *“and all the trees.”* Any tree will do, because the signs are everywhere if we are alive to them. *“Joy,”* said Simone Weil, *“is the overflowing consciousness of reality.”* The semiconscious are shut off from the two great sources of healing in Advent: the grief that comprehends our circumstances, and the joy that calls to us like music from tomorrow.

*“Jesus’ ministry,”* says Walter Brueggemann in *The Prophetic Imagination*, *“takes place between the clinging and the yearning.”* That’s also where we find ourselves in Advent, in the *“time between the times”* when the veil between worlds grows thin and the holy calls to us from the world to come. It is both an evening time and a morning time, when we learn what we must relinquish and to what we must open our hands, what is dying and what is being born.

Which leads us back to Advent:

When it comes to looking forward to Christmas, our culture needs no help from the liturgical year. But Advent directs our attention to different signs with which the culture tends not to concern itself because they are uncomfortable to consider. Culture looks toward the sentimentality of Christmas; Advent looks toward the shifting of culture’s own paradigms. Culture assumes a rather shallow display of good will and emotional warmth; Advent demands good will of systems that aren’t, by their design, predisposed to it. Culture hopes for an economic boost to keep itself aloft; Advent looks toward an economy that is just.

Advent stands at odds with the pristine beauty and tranquility that culture hopes for this time of year. Industry has been preparing to have everything in place. It has worked diligently on its store window displays and sales campaigns. It has chosen the right colors, the right scents, and the right textures to evoke familiar feelings and lull us back into familiar concerns.

Advent seeks to snap us out of that. The Son of Man’s arrival comes without tranquility. Instead, it yanks us off the hamster wheel of life. It calls us away from the distractions of our trappings and our revelry. It competes with culture’s insistence that everything is great, and we should continue on as we are, without care.

And it challenges so many things that are familiar to us, areas where we are comfortable and complacent: The proliferation of violence in our society. Income disparity, poverty, and the fact that such a thing as the *“working poor”* can even exist. Our disdain for the stranger among us. Sexism in the workplace, in health care, and in the public square. Our corrections system’s devastating effect on the poor, immigrants, and families of color—and our economic dependence on this system as a source of cheap labor. The misunderstanding and mistreatment of people who fall outside binary norms. The assumed supremacy and normativity of a relatively small group of people.

The coming of the Son of Man challenges our comfort and familiarity with the systems we navigate every day. The righteous branch springing up from David comes as an agent of justice—bad news for all that is unjust. And if we are honest, we all participate in unjust systems and often benefit from them.

The eschatological tone of the assigned Advent texts is quite appropriate for the times in which we are living. They call us to anticipate a dramatic paradigm shift, one that may well challenge the systems and structures we hold dear. The things that have pacified us for so long can expect to be overthrown in favor of true justice. Now is the time for redemption, of the downtrodden and oppressed but also of entire systems—and of those of us who benefit from them, that all of us may participate in God’s will on earth as it is in heaven.

No one has ever expressed the hope of the second coming more clearly than Martin Luther King Jr.: *“I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word.”* Until then, we are bound by faith not to be weighed down by the worries of this life. There is too much work to do, too much watchful readiness to maintain. I love the word *prolepsis*, which means acting *as if* what you expect to happen has already happened.

One person who understood this was Tony Campolo, a Baptist minister who became a powerful if unusual force within Evangelicalism by challenging believers to reject partisan politics and to pursue social justice. He died on Nov. 19 at his home in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania. He was 89.

He argued that a believer’s first loyalty was not to any political faction but rather to the words of Jesus. He helped establish a movement within Evangelicalism called *Red Letter Christians,* the name a reference to the style in some editions of the Bible of printing the words of Jesus in red.

Dr. Campolo drew his followers’ attention in particular to Jesus’ teaching, as recorded in Chapter 25 of the Book of Matthew, that Christians will be judged according to how they treated the hungry, the unclothed, the sick, the imprisoned — *“the least”* of humanity.

In his book *“The Kingdom of God Is a Party”* (1990), Dr. Campolo relayed a story that he said was *“essentially what happened”* to him one time when he was on the speaking circuit in Hawaii.

Jet-lagged, he found himself eating a doughnut at 3:30 a.m. in a greasy joint where, he recounted, he was joined by eight or nine prostitutes.

He took notice when one of the women — he called her Agnes — mentioned that the next day was her 39th birthday. She had never had a birthday party, she said.

When the women left, Dr. Campolo learned that they were regulars and resolved with the owner to throw Agnes a party the next night.

She was moved to tears when she walked into the surprise celebration and saw the blazing candles in her honor. When Agnes left, Dr. Campolo invited everyone left in the diner to pray. The owner, taken aback and not entirely pleased, asked Dr. Campolo what kind of church he belonged to.

In what Dr. Campolo described as *“one of those moments when just the right words came,”* he replied that he belonged to a church that throws birthday parties at 3:30 a.m. for people like Agnes.

And so, with this in mind, I’ll leave you this morning with these brief thoughts, encapsulated in a true tale from our nation’s past:

During the colonial period in American history, an eclipse of the sun caught members of a New England state legislature off guard. In the midst of general panic a motion was made to adjourn, but one of the legislators stood up and said, *“Mr. Speaker, if it is not the end of the world and we adjourn, we shall appear to be fools. If it is the end of the world, I choose to be found doing my duty. I move you, sir, let candles be brought.”*

Friends, let’s bring on the Advent candles, and let’s live in love and act in hope until our Lord comes again.