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Advent 1C – Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36  
November 29, 2009  
First Sunday at Rockland Congregational Church as Senior Pastor  
**“Stand Up and Face the Future”**

Our Gospel reading today may make many of you think you have made a huge error in calling me.

“What is he going to do with this?

We call a senior pastor and the first thing he preaches on is the end of the world?

What were we thinking?”

I appreciate your concern and believe me when I say your concerns about texts like these are my concerns as well.

My friend Leo in Cooke City MT runs a restaurant called “Buns N’ Beds”, the only restaurant open all winter long. When I started into Advent at the church there, he knew about the lectionary, since he grew up Catholic. He asked me why in the world I was preaching on the end of the world. I told him, “Actually, I am not, but you are right – those are the texts for today.” He wanted to preach end-of-the-world sermons, but I am not sure it would have been a good idea to let him loose in the pulpit.

So let me assure you, as I did Leo, from the beginning that I will not preach on the end of the world today. They are texts that make me uncomfortable as well.

I will however talk about reading the signs

and living into our future in Christ

and what I think Jesus is doing here with the disciples.

I am glad to see that you take seriously the church calendar and seek to commemorate and acknowledge the season of Advent. Not all churches do this, which is a surprise to me, but I can understand it.

The beautiful thing about following the church calendar and using it to define our worship is that we are more able to follow the story of God and God’s people.

Our worship,

our hymns,

our texts for the day,

our sermons

and our celebrations

all seek to deepen our lived experience of the faith

and find our place in the grand story

of God and Christ in the world.

The season of Advent is quite simply the season of waiting. “Advent” is simply the Latin phrase for “that which is coming”.

I suspect there are some of you out there who hate waiting as much as I do.

When I was a teenager, while I waited in line for movies or in the store or wherever else I had to wait,

I would do the math and figure out, if I had to do this waiting thing a few times a week for as long as I was standing in whatever forsaken line I was,

years and years of my life would be wasted just waiting.

Between sleep and waiting in lines, I saw hours and hours of time I could devote to...

well, I don’t really know what...but I would have had some time to figure out what.

For centuries and centuries, the Israelites reflected on the words of the Prophets and examined the history of their people, from Genesis through the Psalms,

looking

and speaking

and preaching

and, of course, waiting.

In the midst of their waiting, it became clear that the Israelites were waiting for a Messiah,

a great rescuer,

one who would save them from oppression,

from bondage to external authorities and kingdoms,  
from themselves.

Their waiting was legitimate because they had already experienced the freedom from oppression,  
the release from bondage  
and the freedom from self that God could and does provide.

Whether it was from Egypt or Babylon,  
whether it was from persecution or attack,  
they knew that God is the God who frees,  
the God who releases,  
the God who gives peace to the distressed  
and justice to the oppressed.

And so they waited.

It is in the midst of this waiting,  
in the midst of yet more oppression by the Roman Empire,  
in the midst of the calcification of religious doctrine and exclusion,  
that the Man from Galilee arises.

Claims to Messiahship during this “in-between” time were a dime a dozen in Jesus’ time,  
so Jesus had to stand out from the others.

He did this

by reframing,

by reinterpreting and

by returning

to a way of understanding that ended up

flipping everything

inside out and upside down for the Jewish culture.

Jesus still does that, doesn’t he?

Or at least, he should.

The Gospel of Luke, which the lectionary explores for this church year, presents the disciples as  
the inheritors of the teachings of Jesus Christ.

They inherit not just the teachings of Jesus,

but also a renewed understanding of history as it relates to God’s work amongst the people.

In Luke 24, when Jesus is with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus,

Jesus interprets

all of Scripture,

all the history of God,

according to a single defining characteristic –  
himself.

In other words,

all our waiting,

all our concern about the future,

all our seeking signs in the present and the past

are defined and understood in relationship

to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This is quite a radical claim, is it not?

At the same time, this is all very abstract.

The effect of Jesus Christ upon history is the subject of many a philosopher and makes for  
interesting reading, but I don’t think it is really the focus of our readings today. What I have said  
provides a good foundation for what I think Jesus is really up to in this talk of signs and the future.

In the Gospels of Luke, Jesus’ primary focus in talk like this is to establish the foundations of his  
relationship with the disciples and with us.

Indeed, Jesus tells us that

“heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”

Rather than pointing to some literal prediction of history as it shall be,

Jesus is teaching us simply how to understand the world as it presents itself to us.

In other words, the signs we read in the world either point to Christ or they do not.  
If the signs either point to Christ or do not, the outcome is the same –  
Jesus Christ lays claim upon all of experience and the whole world.  
If Christ is not there, as with the disciples on the Road to Emmaus,  
what is the understanding that will make Christ present? If Christ is present in those signs,  
what are we called to do as followers  
and lovers of our Lord and Savior?  
The words of Christ that do not pass away are those words that enact the work of Christ in our  
world.

Love,  
mercy,  
justice for those who suffer at the hands of others,  
hope for those who despair,  
peace,  
healing of  
mind, body and spirit,  
unity,  
reconciliation.

Reading the signs of the environment and world around us  
means reading where the words and work of Jesus Christ  
are either active or not active  
in our lives,  
in our communities,  
in our lives.

Because of our foundation in a relationship with Jesus Christ,  
because of what Christ has done for each one of us on the Cross, we have a way of reading the  
signs of the cosmos in such a way  
that the Glory of God through Jesus Christ may be enacted.

This is why we need not fear the cosmic reality of God and Christ.

God changes things.  
God alters our experience.

God gives us the opportunity to live  
in freedom, faith and fellowship.

Things do not look the same from the perspective of a life with God.

This is why Jeremiah can say the city of Jerusalem and the country of Judah will live in salvation  
and safety by renaming those places  
“The Lord is our righteousness.”

Jeremiah wrote these words as the armies of Babylon lurked at the boundaries of Judah and  
Jerusalem.

Destruction, death and disaster  
rose like a huge storm on the horizons of the Jewish people.

But what does Jeremiah do?

He buys land to show his confidence in God's promises to Israel.

He, even though imprisoned, reads the signs of supposed impending destruction  
and sees new life,

hope

and joy

springing up like the seeds of a lush spring morning in the midst of dire signs.

Jeremiah lives into the future promised by God,

while all around him enemies and friend alike breathe predictions of destruction and chaos.

Jeremiah stands up and faces the future that God has promised. He stands tall and acts in  
confidence that God will do as God says,

because the Lord is indeed our righteousness.

All that makes us holy,

righteous  
and pure  
are from God  
and because of God alone.

When I was a kid, the movie theater in Eau Claire, Wisconsin used to do double features for some ridiculous price, like \$1. Usually, they would show a Disney film like Herbie the Love Bug or The Apple Dumpling Gang, and they would follow it up with what I was really interested in – Godzilla movies.

But one Saturday afternoon, the movie was Hal Lindsey's The Late Great Planet Earth. Lindsey read the signs of the Cold War and saw the end of the world as we know it. He quoted our reading for today and a bunch of things from Revelation. The four beasts in Revelation were the countries allied with the great Satan, the USSR. The prophecies of Daniel seemed to match perfectly the unfolding of present history.

I was about 14 and it scared the living daylights out of me.

You all know this routine.

The end of the world is coming soon  
because my interpretation says it is.

Repent and be prepared.

In and of itself, "repent and be prepared" is actually good advice. We should always be prepared for when Jesus comes again. Luther called that way of living "living out of our baptism".

In other words,

know that Christ has already saved you  
and you stand clean and redeemed in the face of God through Christ  
because you have been baptized into a life with Christ.

Be ready because Christ has already made you ready.

It is funny, though – Luther's sermon on these verses from Luke today read just like a Hal Lindsey movie. "It seems to me", he says throughout, "that there are more storms, more eclipses, more falling stars than ever before. More depravity, more wars, more immorality than ever before. The end is near."

Well, that was almost 500 years ago and here we are. Predictions of the end of the world are as common as waves on the sea.

There are plenty who will do it for you even today.

That day comes and goes and we are still here.

This doesn't mean that tomorrow we won't be, but I am pretty confident that if Jesus is telling us how to read the signs, the coming about of the end of time and the beginning of the reign of the Kingdom of God is wholly God's doing, not ours.

Quite frankly, take any point in history and you will find any number of people who will tell you that no time has been more indicative of Christ's second coming than this one right now.

Either it is never true, or more likely,

it is always true that now is always a good time for Christ to come again.

When I read things like this,

I try to ask a different question.

I try to ask,

"What is it that Jesus is asking of us by telling us this?"

I think Jesus is asking the disciples and us

to always have an eye on the future we have been promised,

to always look to our relationship with God and Jesus.

Looking to that future means looking to the hope promised by God and Christ.

That is what makes waiting hard –

being hopeful.

By living a future focused life in Christ, though, we see in at least two directions:

First, we see inwardly and

look for the signs which point us to  
how we are living into the words and works of Christ  
in our life,  
in our own words,  
in our own works and  
in our relationships.  
We can read the cosmic signs,  
the sun, the moon and the stars  
and see how we have conflated our relationship to others to be greater than it actually is,  
and then seek the promise and work of Christ in our deepest being.  
This is the practice of repentance and seeking forgiveness.  
Or we can read the cultural, political and personal signs  
and see how we have stepped away from living out of our baptismal promises in our relationships  
with God and others.  
Our inward future with God and Christ make demands on our present lives with others.

Secondly, we see outwardly  
and look for the signs that point us  
as a church,  
as a community of believers,  
to how we are living into the words and works of Christ  
in these walls and in our community.

What are our desires in doing this or that action in the church,  
in the community?  
Do we do it because we are required to,  
because someone told us to?  
We just celebrated Thanksgiving, where we give thanks for all the Lord has provided for us. It  
strikes me that living out of a spirit of Thanksgiving is like living out of our baptismal promises.  
We seek the words and work of Christ  
in the community,  
in the church,  
in our relationships  
out of gratitude for what Christ has already done for us.  
Paul puts it this way in 1 Corinthians:  
“(God) is the source of your life in Christ Jesus,  
who became for us the wisdom of God,  
and righteousness and sanctification and redemption...” (1:30).  
We live from the source of our very lives,  
and it is from that foundation that we read the signs of the day.  
Looking inwardly and looking outwardly for the signs requires some effort and work on our parts.  
It is not a clear knowledge we have,  
for we are still in the flesh,  
still subject to the effects of sin and brokenness.  
Knowing this, though, we wait.  
We stand together and look to the future together.  
We celebrate Advent together.  
We live in between Christ’s death on the Cross  
and the coming of our perfection in Christ again.  
To us, it sure seems like a long wait.

And in the midst of that waiting,  
hope wells up,  
like a spring pressing toward the surface of the earth.  
This hope is the Lord’s doing.

But this hope is not at the expense of the pain you have suffered this past year.  
It is not at the expense of the worry and despair that has overcome some of you.  
It is not at the expense of loss –

loss of job,  
loss of health,  
loss of a loved one –  
that has befallen you.

Instead, this hope,  
this promise of God,  
rises up right in the midst of those difficult and troubling signs.  
Right in the middle of all those things,  
God stands as  
our guardian,  
our shepherd,  
and directs our vision to a wider view,  
a greater future.

When we stand up and look to the future,  
we acknowledge that our redemption draws near,  
we acknowledge that the foundation of our lives is Christ Jesus, we acknowledge that,  
though worry, fear and despair breathe at the boundaries of our experience,  
we acknowledge with Jeremiah that new life, joy, hope await us.

While all sorts of portents and omens of trouble and disaster may swirl around us,  
do we have the confidence to watch the things of heaven and earth pass away,  
knowing that the words and work of Jesus Christ for us are the solid foundation of our life and  
faith?

I know that my confidence is easily shaken.  
That is why we need each other  
and that is why we get together like this –  
to remind each other that we stand up  
and face the future  
knowing that  
our promise,  
our hope  
and our future  
lay in the words and work of Jesus Christ,  
which will never pass away.  
AMEN