

11-28-21

Advent 1

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Luke 21:25-31

The Day is Surely Coming!

We've all gotten warnings of various kinds. Most of them can be intimidating. Some of them can be downright scary. Sometimes we hear them so often from the same sources that we stop paying attention to them.

You won't have to hear stories about my good friend Dr. Pepper for much longer, I promise. Pepper lived well into his nineties. He served the Church in various roles for most of those years. Back in Pepper's day, the Church of which he was a part didn't have a real pension. They had a retirement program. It was supposed to provide for ministers in retirement, but it did not provide a real lifetime income; it didn't expect people to live as long as Pepper did. Several months before Pepper's retirement account was set to run out of money, they began to send him letters (the way we communicated in those days). Pepper was accustomed to getting letters from the denomination all the time. Sometimes even from the financial wing of the Church. So he figured it was another appeal for money for some special offering and sat it aside. The next month, another letter came, and Pepper put it in the same stack, figuring he'd get to it when he had time, which, at his age, he seemed to have less and less of.

Eventually, those warning letters stopped. And the first of the next month rolled around, and the envelope that usually brought Pepper's retirement check didn't show up on the first of the month, as it had for years and years. You'd have to know Pepper to know the kind of indignation he could muster when people didn't do what they were supposed to do. Whichever of

the Retirement Fund staff answered the phone that day got an earful. That person listened patiently, and when Pepper stopped long enough to take a breath, he began to explain. No, they had not made a mistake. Pepper's account was empty. They had sent letters warning him of this for months. The day is coming, those letters had said, when you'll run out of money.

Pepper went back to his stack of unopened mail, and, sure enough, there they were. The day is coming, those letters said. And there wasn't much that even Pepper could say in response!

We've talked several times before about both good and bad teachers I've had through the years. We may have talked about one of the worst of those before. He was my high school biology teacher, Mr. Roby. Mr. Roby's idea of teaching was to sit behind that big lab table up front and read the biology book to us, then give us some kind of worksheet to do for the rest of the period. Once in a while we'd get to dissect something or run some other kind of experiment, but, most of the time, class consisted of Mr. Roby reading the book to us and then our sitting there working on worksheets. Sometimes Mr. Roby would drift off to sleep while he was reading. Sometimes we did, too. We apparently never worked quite hard enough on those worksheets because almost always, before the period was over, Mr. Roby would launch off into one of his talks. They had nothing to do with biology. They were usually about what poor students we were, disrespectful, ungrateful. And those talks always wound up the same way: A day is coming, Roby would say, when you'll remember these things I'm telling you today. You'll look back on these days when you're out there struggling, wishing you had paid more attention in school. You'll look back on these days, and you'll remember that Roby told you! The day is coming. And you'll remember: Roby told you!

That's the way most of us deal with warnings. Either we put them off like Pepper did or we figure they don't apply to us right now, and we wait until we get to that day that is surely coming when we remember that Roby told us!

The warning that Jesus offers in Luke's Gospel sounds pretty intimidating. Signs in the sun and the moon and the stars. Distress among nations. People will faint from fear and foreboding. That's the way most of us have probably been conditioned to think about how life as we know it will end. It's not something most of us want to around for. We like the stories about Jesus appearing in the clouds and our meeting him in those clouds and our flying away to heaven with him leaving all the infidels to endure tribulation here while we and all the faithful sing hymns around the throne of God for ever and ever.

Most of us have heard warnings like that one many times. Those of us who grew up going to revival meetings probably heard more of them than those who worshiped here and in places like this one all their lives. That's how some came to be here. Like Pepper, we kept stacking those warnings up in a stack of things that didn't apply to us until we eventually stopped listening to them. And we sought out places that had other things to say to us, places that focused on God's love rather than God's anger.

But those warnings keep coming, whether we listen to them or not. And that's as it should be. The day is surely coming when this life will end. The Bible tells several different stories about how all that will unfold, but even Jesus himself said that he didn't know how it would all come to be. God knows. And when God is ready, Go will bring an end to this age and will usher in the age of everlasting light and life for all the faithful.

That points to part of the problem with the way we deal with warnings like this one. We open that past due notice and figure we'll deal with that tomorrow. We see that note that the special offer ends tomorrow, and we know there will be another one next week. Whatever gloom and doom we encounter; we assume we can work around it. So we usually turn it off before we are sure we've even gotten all the message.

That's absolutely the case in Jesus' words in Luke. Yes, there will be an end to life as we know it. Yes, it will involve change for all of us. But it is not something we should fear, not even when it comes with all the fearsome language Luke uses to

describe it. If we keep reading, we find hope instead of fear. We find assurance instead of insecurity. When all these things happen, Jesus says, when the earth starts to tremble and everything looks like it's falling apart, don't cower in fear, but stand up; raise your heads because your redemption is drawing near! The end of this age will usher in the age that will never end, the age that will carry us into that place that God has prepared for us and for all the faithful.

I know you want to know more than that about how all that will happen. Most of us do. And I wish I could tell you all you want to know. But even Jesus said that he didn't know all the details of how it would all unfold. But Jesus knew what he calls us to know, that faith in God and trust in God's plan are the best resources we have in life and in death and in any kind of uncertainty that comes between them.

That kind of thinking didn't originate with Jesus. We certainly learn a lot about it from him, but way back in the day of the Prophets, people were calling people of faith to trust in God in the midst of what they thought was the worst thing that could ever happen to anybody. The Exile, when people were carted off from their homes and all they knew and treasured and made to live in places and in ways they didn't choose took people's minds back to the days when their ancestors had lived as slaves in Egypt. The Prophets warned people for years about what their fate would be if they didn't turn from their willful and wayward behaviors and return to God's ways. But those warnings went on that same stack with Pepper's letters. Surely something would happen to keep this from happening. But, in time, the Babylonians came, and Jerusalem lay in ruins, and people sat by the rivers of Babylon and sang songs and remembered their home in Zion. But the Prophets never gave up on hope. And they called the people to join them in that hope. Jeremiah spoke those words that sound as if they were meant expressly for the first Sunday Advent: The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the House of Israel and the House of Judah. And this is the covenant I will make with them, says the

Lord. I will put my law within them. I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God and they shall be my people. I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. The days are surely coming!

For the Hebrews, those words brought hope on two levels. The day was coming when they would go home! We talked about this exile and these prophets with some of the kids who are going through Confirmation education before I leave. We talked about how the Prophets warned people about what would happen, and then it did. Powerful people came and carried them away. I told them it would be like someone showing up at their house this week, Thanksgiving week, and telling them they couldn't live here anymore, that they had to live in Wisconsin or some other such place, a place where what the Big Ten passes off as football is all they'd have to watch, a place where they play ice hockey and lacrosse. One of those kids had a quick answer. He has a deer rifle and he had other plans for those Big Ten folks who might try to carry him off! I assured them all that that wasn't a real threat for us, but it is exactly what happened to the Hebrews—and that they were warned! But all the while they lived in that strange and weary land, God promised that they would go home. The day is surely coming, says the Lord, when this time will be over, and we will go back to what we know and what we understand to be the truth. And then we'll know that God's Word is truth and that it is the guide for living that we should follow. The day is surely coming.

Those same people looked even further down the road. To a day even farther way than their homegoing. They looked for a Savior, for the One God promised again and again to send. They looked for Jesus. When the Prophet said, "The day is surely coming," they heard promise on at least those two different levels, but they heard promise. They claimed hope.

It's always a little unsettling when we come to worship on this first Sunday in Advent. The rest of the world has been in full on Christmas mode for weeks. Everybody's worried about whether gifts will get off those container ships on the Coast and

get under our trees in time. Christmas music has been playing in stores for weeks. Cable TV has been showing Christmas movies for weeks. We get to church this morning, and the tree is up, the decorations are out, the Advent candle is up, and the preacher is talking about the end of the world! What is this?

The day is coming. The day is surely coming. Christmas will come whether those containers get off loaded or not. Life as we know it will end when God says it's time. We've had all this time to get our lives aligned to God's purpose for them. And today gives us one more opportunity. If not this year, if not this week, then someday—the day is surely coming. This word of hope and not threat is for all of us to pay attention to. We can look at the mess we've made of the world and tremble in fear or we can remember that Jesus said that just when we think it's all falling apart, that's the time we should stand up, not hunker down. We should lift up our heads, not cover them in fear. Stand up. Lift up your heads. Because our redemption is closer today than it has ever been. The day is surely coming. If not today, then whenever God decides it's time. The day is surely coming. Our redemption is near. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Prayers of the People

Merciful God, who came among us in Jesus of Nazareth, who abides with us by the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit, and who will come again to claim and redeem us, you call us to goodness in the midst of evil, to justice in the midst of injustice, to hope in the midst of fear, and you lead us in the paths that end in these things. You encourage us with signs of your coming, and you encourage us to keep watch so that we can greet you when you come as our Savior, with our heads held high and our spirits buoyed by hope. In these days of watching and waiting, we gather to pray for the world that needs your saving power more than ever.

We pray for nations at war when you call us to be makers of peace.

We pray for all who suffer from the violence of war but also the violence of communities and neighborhoods and families and playgrounds and everywhere else that is not yet conformed to your will.

We pray for all who live in worry and fear, about financial insecurity, about poor leadership, about uncertainty, about their health—give all who worry confidence in your love and care for them and help them to trust in those gifts and for all the different forms in which they come.

We pray for all who have forgotten and especially for those who know but ignore the ways of righteousness and hope. You have never failed to show us the way. Help all who will not follow you to turn and find hope and peace.

We pray for those who have never heard your word of rescue and hope. Help us to more faithful to share it

We pray for all who have lost hope, for all who have fallen into despair, and for some who have lost their way. Help them to find the way to your house, to your people, but most importantly, to your promise of redemption and hope.

We pray for your Church at work in the world, that we may grow more faithful to hear your Word and to do your will and to work even on the hard days in full confidence that your word is the truth and that the day is surely coming when your truth will prevail.

Now, by the power of the Holy Spirit at work among us, keep us faithful and help us to train our hearts and minds even as we pray as Jesus taught us to pray when he said: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.