

“The Days are Surely Coming”

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Luke 21: 25-36

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“The days are surely coming,” our first Scripture lesson reads. “The days are surely coming,” and all I can think about is, yes sir, that’s right, and the days are coming are coming mighty fast at that. Twenty five days to be exact. Twenty five more shopping days, twenty five more days to do the errands, cards, and presents, twenty five more days to do the decorating, baking and entertaining. Today, with Thanksgiving behind us and the first candle flickering on the Advent wreath, we know the days are not just surely coming – they are here.

They say that nothing is certain except death and taxes, but I beg to differ. Christmas is certain, too, and every year it comes around, ready or not. We can count on it. And, for the most part, unlike death and taxes, we welcome its reliability. Not just its reliable appearance on the calendar, but the reliability of its traditions. We like our Christmases to be the same each year.

No matter how old we are, many of us can still remember exactly where we spent the holidays as children, where the tree stood, when we opened presents, even the warm and spicy smell of mother’s cookies or Grandma’s pies.

And later, when we first left home for college or the service, how acutely we relied on the certainty of Christmas coming ... to be back home, where the food, the decorations, the traditions would all remain the same. Those were the Christmases we counted on to be secure when our brave new worlds were swirling way too fast around us. Through late-night studying or endless drills and all the grown-up worries we were only just beginning to face, through all our trials we would lean on this single, shining hope: “The days are surely coming” when we’d be back home for Christmas.

Christmas. We still rely on it. Friends move away, new friends are made, babies are born and loved ones die, our families celebrate a marriage or mourn divorce, and Christmas comes. No matter what else happens Christmas comes, and we find ourselves still drawn to its unchanging nature. Each year it is the same: the angel Gabriel appears to Mary: “Hail, O favored one, the

Lords is with thee.” Joseph receives word in a dream that Mary carries in her womb no other than Emmanuel, God with us. The shepherds watch their flocks by night, and are suddenly surrounded by a multitude of the heavenly host singing, “Glory to God in the highest; peace on earth, good will to all.” The days are surely coming when we will again hear this good news: that a Savior has been born to us, a baby who is Christ, our Lord.

This is the stuff of real certainty, of course – the promises of God fulfilled before our eyes each year. The certainty behind all of our rituals and decorations and predictable feasts, beneath all of our best traditions, and perhaps even our worst, the certainty on which all of our Christmas pageantry was built is this: the unshakable good news that God loved us so very much that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. Born to us that dark night so long ago was no other than the savior of the nations, God, drawn near to us. Behold the days are surely coming, and we know that the promises fulfilled by God at Christmas brings with them reassurance and encouragement and peace.

But there is a second promise of this season that is no less certain, that is equally reliable, equally reassuring, equally encouraging and hopeful. It is the central message of Advent, to which Paul’s letter to the Romans and our rather fiery gospel lesson points us this morning: it is the promise not just of Christmas past but of a promise yet to be fulfilled, the hope of God’s ultimate redemption of the world.

God’s ultimate redemption of the world. In theological language, we call it eschatology, or end time, which has to do with the final destiny of each individual and all humanity, and, indeed, of the whole cosmos. The Bible teach us that, just as Christ was present at the creation of the world, so also will the end of time be ushered in by the return of Christ in glory to judge the living and the dead. A number of Old Testament and New Testament passages address this end time in what we call apocalyptic language, that is, in vivid and fiery images such as this morning’s gospel reading. These days, these final days, are surely coming too, we know not when or how; but they are coming just as surely as the Christmas that we celebrate each year.

Advent always begins this way, always opens with the reminder of the certainty of the end. I will acknowledge that we don’t always welcome this

reminder with open arms. These passages we hear every year as Advent opens are somewhat off-putting to us; they seem remote, and even, perhaps, scary: “There will be signs in the sun, the moon and the stars, and on the earth distress among the nations. ... People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.”

But what we miss so often in these fearsome words are the promises to which they point. Alongside the frightening warning that “heaven and earth shall pass away” is this assuring vow: “your redemption is drawing near.” Underneath the fiery language of apocalypse is a comforting message of certainty and hope. At the heart of all the admonitions of the end-times is this unshakable conviction: that all the brokenness of the world will be made whole, all our inhumane deeds and our worst evil banished, all the forgotten and impoverished children cherished and fed. In the end all the dirt and tarnish on our lives will be wiped away, and with it, all our tears as well. This is the certainty that Advent’s ardent readings compel us to hear: “The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise that I made,” the prophet Jeremiah writes. “The whole creation will be set free from its bondage to decay,” Paul’s letter to the Romans promises, “the whole creation will be set free from decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” “Stand up and raise your heads,” says Jesus, “because your redemption is drawing near.”

When will it come? Unlike the certain timing of Christmas, the timing of the end is something that we do not know. Prognosticators have predicted the end of the world over and over and over again, and so far as I can tell, they haven’t been right. But I do not blame them. Some people, like children on the way to vacation, want to know with precision how long the trip will be. We may be almost there ... we may have millions of years left. But to worry about when we arrive, or what the end will look like, misses the point. Much more than a warning of cataclysm in the style movies like “2012” and “The Road,” the certainty of the end times is an invitation about how we live ... about how we live *today*. Let me give just a few examples.

1. If the end God has in store for us is a new beginning, then we don’t have to pretend that everything is perfectly wonderful now. We are freed to acknowledge how imperfect we are, and how frightening

the world can be. Our brokenness, or own inhumanity, our own tears and tarnish - they *need* redemption. As one wise scholar put it, God's promise of the end-times can have a "sanctifying influence," a holy influence, "producing a prayerful watchfulness and a freedom from indulgence and anxiety about things."<sup>i</sup> God's promise let's us look honestly at today.

2. And if the end God has in store for us includes our redemption and, as Romans puts it, "freedom from decay," then whatever suffering of body and soul we are enduring now is temporary. We are assured that the pain we bear is not in vain, but rather is the birthing pain of new life. A better self is still emerging: a kinder self, a wiser being, a more courageous, Christ-like person is still emerging in us. Even death itself cannot contain us, for God has promised new life, life that can never be taken away. This is what the promise means to us
3. And if the end God has in store is secure, then we can live today with the comforting knowledge that Jesus will come again, and usher in the day of our redemption. And just as he came without our help that first Christmas long ago, our final redemption at the end of time will arrive not by our efforts, but by God's alone. It is, as one writer puts it, "God's doing, apart from all human calculation or designing."<sup>ii</sup> I find this immensely comforting. Our ultimate destiny is in God's hands, not ours, and God is not limited by the best that our committees and governments and even our heroes can accomplish. Our salvation, and the world's, will not be defeated by all the unintended consequences of even well-laid human plans. Neither can our redemption be subverted by the powers of evil in the world: no malevolent dictator developing nuclear warfare, no angry terrorist threatening bombs, no corrupt officials, nor fire, nor flood, nor anything else in all creation can stop God's plan for our redemption, and as certainly as Christmas came as God had planned, the final days of our salvation will unfold exactly when and how God chooses.

The power and the hope of this promise can barely be conveyed in words. Perhaps poet Dorothee Soelle comes closest to expressing it in her book Revolutionary Patience, in her poem entitled, “When he comes again.”

Only this AGAIN  
 Keeps him alive  
 Childhood’s forgotten yearning ...  
 Call him home to us  
 He leaves the bright heavens  
 Comes  
 Again  
 Condemned  
 To hand between heaven and earth

And here he remains  
 He absolves the guards  
 Lets the tortured forget  
 Makes hatred subside  
 Teaches the weary to breathe  
 The trembling to sleep  
 The dreamers to act  
 The does to dream

There is so little in life that is certain. Death and taxes, yes, but not much more. We know too well how rapidly things change. A loved one’s brush with death turns out OK; another’s robust health suddenly fails. One friend’s fragile marriage survives while another folds, leaving baffled, grieving kids. Unemployment leads to a new career; someone else’s good job turns into a nightmare when the company is bought. Our parents age and need us more than we had ever guessed they would. Change swirls around us; leaders come and go, world crises rise and fall, the economy grows alternately weak and strong. Our days are never really certain.

Or are they? Here we are again – already Advent. The days are surely coming, very quickly now, and Christmas is upon us once again. We are counting on traditions, we are leaning on the unchangeable certainty of

Christmas. Out of all of our dear treasures of this season the one that we rely on most of all is this: the promises of God fulfilled before our eyes, a Savior, born to us, a baby who is Christ, our Lord.

And these days are also surely coming, just as certainly: the final days of our salvation, and the world's, and the promise of these days brings us immeasurable reassurance and encouragement and hope.

It is the first Sunday of Advent, and for now we know, we keenly know, that we live bracketed by certainties: both with the certainty of Christmas, and also with the certainty of our final redemption. And we dare to remember our own childhood's hope, and we dare to live without our fearful indulgences, and we dare to face this day with courage far beyond this one day's promise. For we live bracketed by certainties.

Childhood's forgotten yearnings

Call him home to us

He leaves the bright heavens

Comes

Again

...he makes hatred subside

Teaches the weary to breathe

The trembling to sleep

The dreamers to act

The does to dream

They say that nothing much in life is certain, but I beg to differ: Jesus came, and he shall come again. Jesus comes in power and glory, full of grace and truth, and our uncertain lives are bracketed by certainty, and hope. "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promises I made." The days are surely coming, says the Lord, and so they are. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup>Preaching through the Christian Year, Year C, p. 6

<sup>ii</sup>Fred Craddock, Preaching through the Christian Year, Year C