

Unpredictable Time(s)
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It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas. Stores are blasting Christmas tunes, street decorations are going up, houses in our neighbourhoods are slowly becoming festooned with lights, Christmas and holiday parties have started, CHFI has switched to playing only Christmas music on their radio station, and Santa has already come to town to close off the Toronto parade. In many ways, December—and even November, for that matter—are seen as one giant countdown to Christmas. The days are ticked off or, now that it's December, the Advent calendars come out in full force—a chocolate a day... or if you're not into chocolate there are any number of Advent calendars to fulfill your personal preferences: tea, beer, wine, cheese, lego, even Paw Patrol is in on the Advent action.

While the December countdown to Christmas is a fun and in some ways creative part of our culture, Advent, for Christians, is different. The consumer-driven countdown doesn't drive our spiritual needs during Advent. In fact, time, in many ways, is different for us during Advent. It isn't just days going by marked by a tiny foil-wrapped chocolate; Advent time isn't linear in that way. It does, however, speak to the past, the present, and the future. It is unpredictable time—it is about waiting for the baby who we know has already been born; it is about waiting for the coming of Christ some time in the future; and it is being witness to Christ who reigns in our lives in the present, who is still being born in us today. It is unpredictable time because it is about this Emmanuel who came, who is coming, and who is with us now.

This week we use Jeremiah as one of our Advent heralds. "In those days" he says, "in those days and at that time I will cause a righteous branch to spring up for David." Jeremiah turns us toward the future. This can be tricky to wrap our heads around when everything around us screams "Christmas!"—a time not prone to forward thinking, but to nostalgia or to immediacy. Jeremiah speaks of righteousness and justice moving forward to the future. But he also recognizes how much easier it is to look backward for God and the trepidation we have in looking forward. Jeremiah is writing for his people to warn them of impending judgement where they will be taken

into captivity and their promised land will become desolate. Times are bleak. The past, for them, was filled with good things, but the present provides only dashed hopes and a faith in crisis. The future seems lost. There is much anger and hurt, for that is the way people often feel when a once-predictable, known world is being wrenched from their hands. Jeremiah's world as he knows it is crumbling around him, so he pushes his people to see God's future, even if that seems ridiculous given the circumstances. Jeremiah reminds them of God's past covenants with God's people—though those promises may seem broken, Jeremiah reassures his people that those ancient covenants are still in tact, they are secure and future restoration will be fulfilled.

In this way, Jeremiah is very relevant to our present time. He is attuned to the yearnings of our times and our collective desire for new times, different times. We may not be facing exile, but so many out there feel uprooted. We are uncertain about the future—climate change, increasing political extremes, technology that knows us and tracks us in new and alarming ways. We are fearful in the present—polarized nations, increased poverty, a Church that is no longer at the centre, but being pushed into the margins. And we are guilt-ridden about the past—what we could have or should have done to keep our world, and even our personal lives from getting to the places they are in now. We sigh deeply. We long for better days; it seems there is so much work to be done. One pastor puts it this way: “Advent is when the church can no longer contain its unfulfilled desire and the cry of longing bursts forth:… O come, o come, Emmanuel!”¹ It's a feeling that seems distant when placed next to images of a cooing baby and a smiling mother, curious shepherds, and singing angels. We live in a complex world where—though our culture may try to convince itself of this—even Christmas is not a balm that automatically soothes the longing and grieving and suffering in this world. Even through the joy, we call out for God to come: come and be present with us; come and fulfill your promises to us; come and lift us with hope and righteousness and justice.

Our passage from Luke does not make looking to the future any easier. Where Jeremiah focuses on promises, restoration, and fulfillment, our verses from Luke start us off with Jesus providing some rather frightening imagery: signs in the sky, roaring

¹ Heidi Neumark

waves, and all of it causing distress. “People will faint from fear and foreboding” (Luke 21:26). It makes focusing on chocolates and carols and consumerism seem like a far more appetizing course of action. Today is the Christian “New Year”, the first Sunday in Advent, and we’re talking about the end drawing near? It’s just another example of how time is unpredictable during Advent—we can’t talk about Christ’s birth and first coming without also talking about his second coming. Because that birth has already happened, over 2000 years ago. And so now we are greeted with scripture verses that invoke chaos and confusion and the stern adult Jesus. And why? Because this season demands a different kind of preparation alongside our typical Christmas preparations of decorating and parties and baking and shopping.

I read a piece about how Vincent VanGogh’s famous painting, *Starry Night*, is like the mood that is captured here in Luke. It pointed out how this painting captures an apocalyptic sky, like what Jesus describes: “There are swirling clouds, bold yellows and white on deep, dark blue and black. There is a bold and bright yellow moon and very bright stars... In the background is a small town, with the church steeple as its most prominent feature. In the foreground, a foreboding flamelike image connects earth and sky...”² The famous painting elicits different reactions from those who admire it. Some see a daunting image of a frightening sky, others see something bold and beautiful, still others a glimpse of God. In a similar way, Luke’s apocalypse elicits different reactions from readers. What we see or read can be considered both beautiful and frightening; but maybe that’s what it’s like to catch glimpses of God—bold, frightening, and beautiful. And as difficult as this text may be to swallow, it also offers us bold and beautiful opportunities to react to what Jesus is saying. Jesus challenges us to look up and to pay attention—not just to the sky, but to the world around us. He also challenges us to be ready. I own a magnet that a friend bought for me that says on it, “Jesus is coming, look busy.” But it’s not about just looking busy. It’s not even about being busy. It’s about being prepared.

We take so much time and care to prepare for Christmas; what might it be like for us to also prepare year-round for Christ’s return? It wouldn’t be like celebrating Christmas or Advent all year long, but it would mean living in an expectant way, living

² Kathy Beach-Verhey

in a hopeful way. “Be alert at all times” Jesus says. “Be on guard” he says. What does it mean to be alert and to constantly prepare? Frankly, it sounds exhausting. It sounds like something that could suck the joy out of, not just Christmas, but everything. But it doesn’t have to be. In many ways, we are already alert. We are here, worshipping. We are listening. We are praying. We are aware of Christ’s place in our lives, past, present and future; and we are responding to that by developing relationships within our church community *and beyond*. We are seeking righteousness and justice. We understand that God keeps promises. And how can we prepare? We can keep our faith. We can listen for the One who will hold us now and in the ending time. We can share our hopes and expectations. We can feast at the table where we are reminded of the incredible gift given to us in Christ.

As one Christian writer says, “Christian discipleship is a kind of *living in between* —we are aware of Jesus, waiting for Jesus, and coming to know Jesus for whom we wait in the midst of an eventful, unpredictable, even tumultuous world, waiting to stand before him, yet not always knowing where he is.”³ We live in unpredictable times, but through Advent and its own brand of unpredictable time, God makes it clear through the voice of Christ and through the voice of Jeremiah, that redemption draws near. The good news of Advent is that Christ is coming, but infused with that coming is the ability to hope, despite all that is falling apart in our lives and in the world around us. Jesus pointed to the leaves on the fig tree as a sign in late winter that summer will come again. In the same way, God’s word, in Jesus, promises us new life. The weary world may sigh and long, but as we wait, prepare, and keep alert we make a commitment to share our hope in the One who was and is and will be. Amen.

³ Wesley D. Avram