

“STAND UP AND RAISE YOUR HEADS”

Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36

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By definition, it is impossible to anticipate an event which has already happened. For example, we cannot anticipate the birth of a child who is already ten years old. We cannot anticipate the landing of the first man on the moon. Sorry, Yankees fans, but we cannot anticipate the winner of this year’s World Series! In each case, the deed is already done, so the time of anticipation is past.

It stands to reason then that we cannot anticipate the coming of Jesus Christ, because Christ has already come as our Savior and Lord. And yet, each Advent season we are called again to this very act of anticipation. First, we are ushered back in time to the period preceding the birth of Christ. We are invited to stand with “captive Israel” and hear God’s promise of a Redeemer, a Messiah, one whom Jeremiah called a “Righteous Branch” who will “execute justice and righteousness in the land” (Jeremiah 33:15). Then we are brought forward to the 1st Century, to the time after Christ has already appeared in the flesh. Here we find the early Church in a similar posture of anticipation, awaiting the second coming of Christ and the completion of God’s creation. In his first coming, Christ begins his redeeming work; but when he ascends to heaven, that work is still unfinished. Therefore, Jesus encourages his followers to anticipate his triumphant return and final victory. In today’s Gospel lesson from Luke, our Lord promises his followers that “they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory” (Luke 21:27).

This is why the essence of the Advent season is anticipation. During these days we anticipate the coming of one who, in a sense, is already here – but at the same time, is not yet here – one who has appeared in history but is now hidden from our sight, one who remains in the realm of promise.

Notice how closely this situation corresponds to our actual experience of God. Advent bears witness to two aspects of that experience. It speaks first of the absence of God. Advent reflects those times in our lives when the divine voice seems strangely silent and the divine power seems sadly impotent. H.G. Wells once remarked that God is “an ever-absent help in time of trouble.” That sentiment is expressed on occasion, not just by cynics like H.G. Wells, but by psalmists and prophets and good religious people in every age. For God is sometimes experienced by God’s people not as a glorious presence, but as a mysterious absence. It’s no wonder that the Scripture readings for Advent are dominated by a mood of yearning, longing, waiting, watching, struggling, and searching. Quite frankly, this is how some people experience God – as an absentee landlord who doesn’t show up when we need him.

But there is a second aspect to the Advent experience; namely, the assurance of God’s presence. After all, the word “advent” comes from the Latin word *advenire*, which means “arrival” or “coming.” Advent testifies to a God who comes, who spans the gulf between heaven and earth and makes himself known in personal ways. During this sacred season, we join with our biblical ancestors in hailing the arrival of God in Jesus Christ. This is why the Advent

season calls us to be watchful and attentive. Here in Luke's Gospel, Jesus says, "Be alert at all times" (21:36); "be on guard . . . [lest] that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap" (vv. 34a, 35a); "stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near" (v. 28).

Friends, Advent is not simply a season on the Church calendar; it is a mood of the human spirit. Advent is not just an occasion to change the color of our altar cloths, like we would change the placemats on our dining tables. Advent is more than a religious ritual that we repeat every year. Advent gives voice to the deepest longings of the human heart. In fact, Advent raises the biggest question in human life and dares to give an answer.

The British chaplain and poet, Gerald Studdert-Kennedy, told about how he stood one night on the cliffs of Dover, peering out into the darkness across the English Channel. He was pondering what kind of force moved in that darkness. What really lies behind the creation? Is the universe indifferent to human life and needs, or is there an unseen power that has purpose and concern? Is there really a God, and, just as important, does this God care a whit about us?

As he pondered these questions, Studdert-Kennedy recalled the experiences of sentries on night duty during times of combat. A sentry squints anxiously into the darkness when he hears someone approaching. The sentry calls out, "Who goes there, friend or foe?" What a relief when he hears the answer, "Friend." At Dover on that momentous night, Studdert-Kennedy asked the same question of the invisible Force moving in the darkness: "Who goes there, friend or foe?"

I suspect that for most people the biggest problem in religion is how to believe in a personal God. I've known a number of individuals who said they rejected atheism, because atheism leaves unsolved more questions that it seems to solve. These people could believe that God, in some sense, exists; but they found it easier to conceive of a First Cause, a Principle of Order, some law or power at the center of things, than to think of God in personal terms as One who actually addresses us, who enters into intimate relationship with us, who cares for us and loves us like a nurturing parent. These folks, too, have peered out into the darkness and asked, "Who goes there, friend or foe?" Or, as the space-age warrior, Luke Skywalker, might put it, "Does the Force have a face?"

Paul Tillich was one of the leading Christian thinkers of the 20th Century. Tillich liked to define faith as "ultimate concern." He observed that all of us have concerns – matters that absorb our minds and claim our hearts. You and I are concerned about our families, our finances, our jobs, our school work, our health, our reputations. To have faith, Tillich said, is to be concerned about something or someone in an ultimate way. Whatever really matters most to us is the true object of our faith. Well, the story is told of a young student fresh out of theological school who asked a new acquaintance, "And what is your ultimate concern?" The little man, who had also read Paul Tillich, replied with a sigh, "That the ultimate be concerned about me."

Friends, the craving of the human heart is for a personal God, a God we can know as Father and Friend, a face that lights up as we approach, a hand that guides us. Over my 42 years as a pastor, I've learned that an impersonal God just will not do. I've sat beside people who were dying, grieving, doubting, and otherwise hurting. In a sense, all pastors pay their dues just by "being there." We don't try to shell out pearls of wisdom; we bring what we call a "ministry

of presence.” But in those times of companionship, what do I have to offer beyond myself? An abstraction? A divine absence? A Force without a face? You and I need something more than an impersonal power who keeps the stars on course. We’re not helped by a God of solitude and apathy; we need a God of partnership and sympathy. We need a God with a human face.

And according to the Scriptures, that need is met in the advent – the “coming” – of Jesus Christ. In him the mysterious absence becomes a gracious presence. In him we discover the personality of love within the power of the universe. In him the Force takes on a face. The God revealed in Jesus Christ is one with whom we can enter into fellowship, to whom we can pray, by whom we are in mercy forgiven, and on whom we can absolutely depend. In any and all circumstances of life, God comes to us. It is always Advent!

During one of the Advent seasons in my own life when I was struggling to be more connected to God, I purchased a little book written by the New Testament translator, J.B. Phillips. It was the book’s title that caught my eye: *Appointment with God*. I have duties and appointments throughout the day, and time alone with God can easily get crowded out. So I expected J.B. Phillips to exhort people like me to make an appointment with God and to keep it. Set aside a definite time each day to seek God’s presence, to talk to God, and just as important, to listen to God. All of which would have been good counsel for yours truly – and perhaps for some of you as well.

But to my great surprise, this was not a book about having a daily devotional. According to J.B. Phillips, you and I have an “appointment with God” every time we celebrate Holy Communion. Or, more accurately, God makes an appointment with us and asks us to keep it. Stop and think about it: God is perhaps more present to us at this table than at any other place. During Holy Communion, God doesn’t just speak to us from afar; God shows up in a tangible, visible way. God doesn’t merely pledge his love with words; God demonstrates his love in the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup. In Jesus Christ, the Word becomes flesh and lives among us; in Holy Communion, Christ’s body and blood are given to us in a personal way. Every time we come to this table, God comes to us; this is our “appointment with God”; it’s why Advent can happen any time of the year – in April and August as well as December.

Friends, the table is set; the signs of God’s gracious presence are before us. “Stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near”!