

120212 Advent 1C -- Promise

Jeremiah 33:14-16; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-16; Luke 21:25-36

“Promises, Promises: Waiting for Change” Rev Seth D. Jones ©

Advent is upon us once again. We begin the church year once again, so happy new year to you all. Actually, the church new year began on St. Andrew’s day, which was Friday, but this is the first Sunday of the new church year. The liturgical church year is where we follow the life of Jesus from before the beginning to beyond the end. Advent is often called ‘the time of waiting’ because we are waiting for the promised Messiah to come into the world.

This morning, then, we read about promises. A promise is the assurance of a particular outcome based on the present situation. Often, the promise is spoken or written by an authority we trust, someone who is capable of carrying out what is needed to create the promised outcome. We, I think we would all agree, want those outcomes to be good ones. In Jeremiah, we read of good outcomes of God’s promises. We hear that God’s righteousness and justice shall reign. Safety and salvation will be the conditions by which Judah and Jerusalem know that God’s kingdom has arrived. The promise will be fulfilled and it is a good thing.

The fulfillment of the promise of God’s kingdom from Jesus’ perspective is disturbing, though. Distress among the nations, confusion, fear and foreboding, the shaking of the heavens - these are the conditions by which people will know God’s kingdom is arriving. The promise will be fulfilled and it doesn’t look like the good thing it is in Jeremiah’s vision.

Several traditions have a good news, bad news story. Zen Buddhism, Judaism and Islam all share this story. One day, a farmer was working in his field with his brother. Their prize work horse broke free, jumped the fence and ran away into the forests. The brother said to the farmer, “Oh, this is terrible. What will you do? Everything is ruined! How will you go on?”

The farmer said to his brother, “It could be good news that the horse ran off, or it could be bad news. We will have to wait and see.”

The next day, the two were in the field again. Over the hill came the horse that had broken free the day before. And with him, he brought a whole herd of wild horses. The farmer opened the gate and let them all into the field. The brother ran up to the farmer and said, “What a wonderful thing! Look at all these horses. This is a great thing for you and your family. A wonderful future awaits you!”

The farmer looked at his brother, then back over all the horses, and said, “This could be good news, or it could be bad news. We will have to wait and see.”

The following day, the farmer and the brother were in town selling some vegetables. The farmer noticed a poster on a bulletin board. It said that all able-bodied men must be conscripted into the military immediately. The brother saw the sign and said to the farmer, “Oh, dear, this is terrible. What will you do about your son? It is terrible that he will be sent off to war. He might die or get sick or be horribly injured or...”

The farmer lifted up his hand to silence his brother. “We will have to wait and see. It could be good news, or it could be bad news.”

A few days later, the farmer, his son and the brother were all in the field planting. The wild horses were scattered nearby, grazing. The horse that had run away a few days before saw something on the hill and spooked. All the horses stampeded toward the forest. The son, being young, strong and fast, tried to catch the lead horse, but tripped and was trampled by the horses, breaking his leg and his arm.

The brother said, “Oh, how sad! Your son has been injured. This is terrible news. Who will help in the fields? What will you do?”

The farmer, with exquisite calm, looked at his brother and said, “I don’t really know, but it could be good news or it could be bad news.”

The next day, the military detail showed up to conscript the son. The son hobbled to the door with his broken arm and leg. The detail took one look at the son and turned around and left. The farmer turned to the brother, smiling, and said, “Brother, is this good news or is it bad news?”

We, each one of us, can see the fulfillment of the promise of God as the wonderful promise of safety and salvation, the great banquet and the extension of God’s justice and righteousness to every part of the world; or we can see it as the coming of confusion, distress, chaos and despair. There are Biblical warrants for both perspectives.

I am not sure if it really matters whether you believe or not. There are many believers who see the coming fulfillment of God’s promise as a phenomenal threat to those who do not believe. When I was in college in the late 1980s, one of the televangelists would stand in front of a poster with nuclear bombs going off, tornadoes, fires and destruction of all sorts on it. In the 1970s, Hal Lindsey focused on these future promises of the coming of God’s kingdom and the ensuing disaster it would mean for the earth. The mistake in this approach is presuming oneself to be exempt from the pain and suffering and destruction the vision entails. If God’s own people, the Israelites, were not exempt from exile, destruction, pain and suffering, why would we think it would be different for us?

And there are many believers who see the coming of God’s kingdom, the fulfillment of the promise, as a sort of gentle crossing over into peace, love, hope and a kind of eternal bliss. The coming of God’s kingdom for them is a little like the Hallmark greeting card moment. You know the ones I mean, the ones in the religious section of the store with the dove flying out of the cloud breaking open with rays of sunlight streaming down? It is a beautiful image. However, it also ignores the reality that great change is always preceded by a time of chaos and difficulty as the new way comes into being.

Both approaches - the good outcome of the fulfillment of God’s promise and the not so good outcome - suffer from the same problem. They are fueled by our emotionality and our sentimentality; our need to get others to feel the way we do about whatever is happening or will happen. The brother in our story at the beginning is doing this. He wants the future to be predicted by how he feels about it.

It could be good news or it could be bad news, all this kingdom of God talk. Now, you and I both know it is ultimately “Good News”. We call the proclamation of the presence of Jesus Christ the “Gospel” and the word in Greek means “Good News”.

Jesus pushes us beyond determining the outcomes and our feelings about those outcomes by calling us to trust God’s greater plan. He says, “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of life”. In other words, “Don’t let others or your own feelings about the present situation determine how you react to the situation”. Then he tells us this is how we are caught up unexpectedly, as if falling into a trap. “When you see these things”, these things you would interpret as bad or good, “know”, instead, “that the kingdom of God is near.”

Jesus tells us our job in the time of waiting, this time of Advent which we visit every year, and this waiting we are doing in between Jesus’ resurrection and when he comes again, is to be alert, pray and gain the strength to stand before and with the Son of Man when he comes. All these circumstances will swirl around us. People get hurt. They get sick. They suffer. People, close people, die. We hurt, get sick, suffer and die. But “heaven and earth will pass away - my words will not pass away”.

We are not left in the middle of the good news and the bad news, however. Our waiting is consumed by faith, hope and love, and the greatest of these is love. The promise of God’s kingdom is known in the person of Jesus Christ, whom we await in expectation because of what God has told us in the Prophets. We know the promise of God because the Holy Spirit empowers us to participate in the love of God, which is God’s creative power and being.

So, as we stand together in this in-between place, where we can interpret the signs as either good news or bad news, we can look to Jesus’ way with the disciples and with us as a guide to navigate the signs and wonders of the time. That way is defined by love - love for God and for one another. Love of God and one another reaches beyond the good signs and the bad signs of the coming of the kingdom of God and binds us together as the people of God, as a people devoted to the Resurrection, as people living out our lives in the given promise of Christ’s presence with us.

Paul, writing to the Thessalonians, knows these things. He is living beyond the sentimental and the emotional and he calls them to do so as well. All around Paul, he tells them is distress and persecution - bad news. He and his team of evangelists, however, are encouraged by the joy and faith the Thessalonians share with them - good news. But beyond the good news and the bad news, Paul says, “we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face”, as you really are, without all the worries, grief, fear and pain that demand so much from us and our relationships. We pray, he says, that our faith, our testimony, our call to the promise of God’s coming kingdom will “restore whatever is lacking in your faith”.

Then he finishes with a blessing, a reliance on the promise of God’s words from the past, a reliance on the assurance that God will do as God said he would do, regardless of what external circumstances suggest. We express our reliance on God’s promise by loving one another. He says, “Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. And may

the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. May he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints”.

The time of Advent is the time of promises made. The outcomes of those promises God has made are made known in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. What really matters, though, in the coming kingdom of God, in this time of waiting, is God’s love for you and our love for one another. It could be good news. Let’s wait and see. Amen.