

Jeremiah 33:14-16      The Lord Our Righteousness  
Luke 21:25-36

When I was young I used to attend baseball games played in by friends and also played in softball games, as some of you did. One feature of those games I always found comically interesting occurred when there was a foul ball hit up into the bleachers where we were sitting. Upon those occasions, someone would always yell, “heads up,” when what they so obviously meant was, “duck.”

The idea of raising the head in that situation involved an overly optimistic hope that one who was not paying attention could look up and find a baseball flying in their direction in time to avoid being hit by it. The reality is that it all happens too fast and if one hasn't seen the ball from the moment it was hit, they won't, and the best thing to do is cover oneself to avoid being hit in the head, that is, duck.

I guess I bring this up not only because it seems an apt illustration but also because winter is descending upon us and baseball is a reminder of summer.

Advent

One of the ways of observing Advent is to focus on one of the following themes each Sunday: hope, peace, joy, and love. There is sometimes a difference of opinion about which is to be the focus on which

Sunday, and there are other ways to work through the season, but many see today, the first Sunday, as the day for hope. The texts we have read are selected with the focus in mind.

The Warning

When we read the passage from Luke, however, there are statements that catch our attention and that raise questions that threaten to contradict the emphasis on hope. We read about signs in the sun and moon and stars. We read about anguish among the nations, the tossing of the sea; terror and apprehension about what is coming on the world, as if it is not something we should hope for.

We read about the shaking of the heavenly bodies. When we see these things happen, we are told, we can know that the Kingdom of God is near. There are some who have made an avocation and cottage industry out of watching for these kinds of signs and trying to predict the end to things.

And Jesus even went so far as to foretell that his generation would not pass away until all these things had happened. And his generation *did* pass away, and at least in some ultimate way, the Kingdom did not come, and just *that* raises questions about whether or not the Son of God could be, humanly speaking, wrong about something.

Nevertheless we are warned to be careful lest we be weighed down with dissipation, and anxieties about life, so that the day comes like a trap. We are told to pray that we miss out on what is about to happen, as if it is not something to hope for.

All of this is quite attractive to some, almost like an action adventure movie like the ones which are so popular nowadays, with the apocalyptic, save the word from evil themes and super-heroes that carry the day. It is one way to express our hope, the biblical hope, that in the end evil is defeated.

We should not easily dismiss these expectations because of their fantastic nature. Neither should we obsess about them because, quite frankly, they leave too much to the unknown, too many unanswered questions, too much left to the imagination.

Duck

The spiritual life can be seen as a warning about future catastrophes. Part of Christian spirituality involves the admonishment of the failure to be prepared for the looming disaster. It can be a way of saying, “run for cover,” or “duck,” so one is not harmed when catastrophe comes.

My suspicion is that most people will not listen to that message by itself no matter how realistic it can be made to seem. Each of us may have a natural sense

of doom and it will never really be news to any of us when things go wrong and turn out worse than had been anticipated, but we also have an instinct for hope that awaits happier endings.

It is amazing though, how much time people spend crying “duck” when what they really mean is “look up.” We would not be able to live long if getting hit was all we had to look forward to.

The Promise

So let us also pay attention to the other way to focus on our hope, and in that we are helped our Advent reading from the prophet Jeremiah. It addresses the hopes of a different generation and is expressed in a simpler, less extravagant way, but it is the same hope;

“In those days, and at that time, I will make a righteous Branch sprout from the David’s line; he will do what is just and right in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: The Lord Our Righteousness.”

Jeremiah was a prophet of the Babylonian Exile, when the entire Israelite civilization was defeated, and the unthinkable had occurred. He expressed in a simple yet powerful way the deep longing and hope of every human being: that justice and rightness will be done,

and the people will be safe. To see the fulfillment of this promise coming, we won't say "duck."

## Heads Up

When the expectation is Christmas, the admonishment is to keep one's head up and eyes open lest one misses the wonderful thing that is about to happen.

Advent is the time to open the eyes and strain the neck to see, to climb the nearest tree like Zachaeus if that is necessary because what is coming is so good it simply can't be missed.

What is it that is coming? Ironically, what Jesus says is that when all those dazzling but threatening things start to happen, "lift up your heads because your redemption is near."

To be sure, when you open your eyes to see the Redemption drawing near, you will see everything. You will see pain and suffering; human inhumanity, people at their worst. You will sigh heavy at the sight of severe injustice and poverty, of reckless sinfulness that seems to be pervasive and to have no end.

But if you keep your eyes open, in the middle of all the other stuff, you will see Grace at work. To believe in the message of Christmas, which means, to be a believer in Christ, is to accept that in some way the kingdom *is* present, did really come when Christ came into the world.

It came like a promise that compels us to commit ourselves in faith to a work of transformation in our lives, and in our world. Sometimes that change seems far away, there is thick darkness in our world, and if we are honest, we will admit that there is darkness in our hearts too. But into that darkness there is a light shining, to use another metaphor. That is what Jesus meant when he told them their Redemption is near.

Advent is the proclamation of that redemption. We are not to duck, but to lift our heads, it is the birth of the Lord Our Righteousness. It is the victory of goodness and light over sin and death and evil.

It is a time of repentance from all the ways we submit to the darkness, and preparation for life in that place where God reigns eternal .

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