

Date: November 29, 2015
 Scriptures: Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36
 Title: A Word of Hope

(This Sunday was the Hanging of the Greens so message was considerably shorter.)

Today, on this first Sunday of Advent,
 we begin our journey to Bethlehem.
 There on bended knee,
 we will look into the face of the Christ child
 and offer up our songs
 of praise and thanksgiving.

Today, we begin.
 We have miles to go and much to do
 'til we kneel before the Christ child
 and offer him our gift,
 the gift of our heart and love.

How strange it seems
 that we do not begin our journey with the story
 of Jesus' genealogy
 or of the angel Gabriel's appearance to Mary
 or of the declaration that
 "In the beginning was the Word
 and the Word was with God
 and the Word was God."

But we don't.
 Instead we begin our journey to Bethlehem
 with Jesus' second coming, not his first.
 Today, Jesus tells us
 his second coming, like the first, will be cataclysmic.
 It will shake the foundations of the world ~
 shake people's core beliefs
 and also shake the foundations
 on which societies and nations rest.

This second coming
 will be characterized by ominous signs ~
 distress in the heavens,
 dismay among the nations,
 confusion of the seas and waves,
 people filled with fear and foreboding.

Does any of this sound familiar?

Tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes,
 torrential rains,
 record-breaking droughts,
 wars and rumors of war,
 fear spreading
 across the face of the earth
 in the wake of merciless terrorism.

While Jesus' prediction may sound all too familiar,
 the reality is Jesus does not tell us
 when all these things will happen.

In the passage immediately preceding today's reading
 Jesus is clearly referring to the destruction of Jerusalem,
 which occurred about 40 years after his death.

But, Jesus does not give us
 the exact date and time of his second coming
 so we can't and don't know when that will be.

Many students of Bible suggest
 today's reading speaks of the time
 immediately before the end of time,
 the time before God makes
 God's Kingdom on earth
 fully visible and present.

This is certainly one viable interpretation of the passage.
 From almost the birth of Christianity,
 it has had both credibility and traction.

It, however, is not the only interpretation of the passage.
 Others suggest

Jesus is referring to
 ". . . any and all of the traumatic events
 that feel like the end of time."

(Mariam J. Kameel, "Exegetical Perspective," Feasting on the Word, Vol. 1, Year C).

Personally, I prefer this interpretation,
 because it speaks to all the endings we experience
 as we journey through life
 not just one cataclysmic ending at some point
 in an unknown and uncertain future.

It speaks to us
 as the doctor gives us a dreaded diagnosis,
 and as our employer tells us
 our services are no longer needed,

and as we learn our spouse no longer loves us,
 and as we watch our child slowly die,
 and as we feel caught by the deadly,
 unseen threat of terrorism.

Today on this first Sunday of Advent,
 Jesus tells us how to deal with endings.

He tells us to
 stand up,
 raise our head,
 take heart,
 be courageous
 whenever we encounter an ending,
 whatever it may be,
 for he, our redemption draws near.

Wanting us to know that this is not an empty promise
 but a promise pregnant with possibility and hope
 he assures us
 that we can trust this promise
 as surely as we can trust
 that the flowering of the fig tree
 heralds the coming of summer.

Then he tells us how to live
 through the cataclysmic events in our lives.

We live through them
 by praying at all times.
 and also turning away from fear and worry
 and turning toward the threads of redemption
 God seeds in our lives.

As we begin our advent journey,
 Jesus give us a word of hope.

This word calls
 for a very different response
 than the one hawked
 by the shopping malls
 and glitzy catalogues.

It calls us
 to prepare our hearts to receive the Christ child
 and also to attend to this hurting world God loves.

Such a response fills the season
 with new meaning and purpose.

It transforms our attitude
from "What will I get?"
to "What can I do and what will I give?"

These questions cause us to dare in the world,
to dare to dream God's possibility
and to dare to birth it in the world.

Friends, heeding this word is
the very best response we can make
as we begin again our journey to Bethlehem. Amen.