

Love the Guest  
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**Jeremiah 33:14-16**

14 The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. <sup>15</sup>In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. <sup>16</sup>In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: ‘The Lord is our righteousness.’

**Luke 21:25-36**

25 ‘There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. <sup>26</sup>People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. <sup>27</sup>Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in a cloud” with power and great glory. <sup>28</sup>Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.’

29 Then he told them a parable: ‘Look at the fig tree and all the trees; <sup>30</sup>as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. <sup>31</sup>So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. <sup>32</sup>Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. <sup>33</sup>Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

34 ‘Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, <sup>35</sup>like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. <sup>36</sup>Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.’

“People, look east. The time is near.” “The days are surely coming, says the Lord.” “Stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” Advent, which begins today, means “coming.” Surely our readings reflect that. And not just the birth of the baby Jesus, the first coming, the incarnation, but also the second coming, Jesus’ return. The language Jesus uses to point to his return is no less than apocalyptic, with nature colluding with God’s plans to serve as a portent for Christ’s return. Such language is reminiscent of the language of the book of Revelation. We might wonder where a sentence like “Be alert at all time, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man” could possibly fit in on this first Sunday of Advent - our joyful preparation of the infant who is God, who is love, who is our salvation. If you’ve been joining the Wednesday Bible Study lately, you likely will not be surprised to hear that these are words of hope, just as is the book of Revelation.

Revelation is filled with visions of horrible endings of all manners but they are not the central message, the central action. Their increasingly troubling, even horrifying, situations set the stage for the central action – only when things have gotten to their worst will God intervene, vanquishing evil for

good, for God's power is greater than evil's greatest power. Because God's power is so great, even evil at its worst is no match for God. Thus the central message of Revelation is not one of despair but one of hope. God is on our side; any evil, any ill, any sorrow which befalls us, even at its worst, is no match for God. The scenes of Revelation should not be fear-inducing, but joy-inspiring. Redemption includes judgment but it is judgment by a loving God. So it is with the redemption of which Jesus speaks in our reading from Luke.

Love the guest is on the way. "The Son of Man coming in a cloud" is no other than Love the guest. This Advent, Love is coming. Despite all else going on around us, Love is coming! Love is the guest whose arrival we count down on our calendars. Love is the guest for whom we ready our homes. Love is the guest for whom our hearts quiver with excitement. Love coming does not undo all else that is going on but all else becomes bearable when colored with Love's presence.

Even with Love, or maybe because of Love, we cannot ignore all else that is going on. You know how aware you are of your own challenges and problems. You're aware of the challenges and problems of people you know. Even if you don't watch the news, you can't help but have a peripheral understanding of challenges and problems in the world. And the more aware you are, well, sometimes the sadder you are. Sometimes you see the world out of balance, with more sorrow than joy, and by a wide margin. Sometimes you wonder how this can be if God is a loving God. Sometimes you lose hope. Sometimes you despair.

Professor and theologian Jennifer Ryan Ayres says of our despair, "While despair is among the most human of human conditions, it cannot be fully understood apart from its theological implications." She says, "In a number of his writings, Reinhold Niebuhr associated despair with our failed attempts to procure security for ourselves, optimistically pretending that we are not subject to the vicissitudes of creaturelieness."<sup>1</sup> Have you ever tried to procure security for yourself? For someone you love? Or even someone you just met? Ayres continues, "Despair is characterized primarily by the conspicuous absence of theological hope. Humans meet despair when they cannot imagine God's promised alternative future."<sup>2</sup>

The message of Jeremiah and the message of Jesus through Luke is that God is loving, that God is love, that God is righteous. Pastor Deb Block, from Immanuel Presbyterian in Milwaukee, defines this righteousness as the "humble ethic of living toward others in just and loving relationships."<sup>3</sup> There is much about which to be despairing but just as God's power is greater than that of evil, so, too, can our hope in God be greater than our despair in the world. Ayres says, "Trusting in God's provision for us in

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<sup>1</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 1*, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 1*, p. 6.

the past, we imagine what shape God's fulfillment of promises will take in the future. Although we do not bring about God's intended alternative future through sheer force of will, in our waiting we do try to place ourselves in a posture so that we might become partners with God in the advent of a new reality."<sup>4</sup> In the coming of a new reality, we have hope, just as Jesus directs: "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with...the worries of this life." Have hope, for your God is greater than your worries. There's a phrase going around the Internet that puts it this way: Don't tell God how big your problem is; tell your problem how big your God is.

Long before the Internet, Tertullian, one of the early fathers of our faith, offered such reassurance this way: "The kingdom of God, beloved brethren, is beginning to be at hand; the reward of life, and the rejoicing of eternal salvation, and the perpetual gladness and possession lately lost of paradise, are now coming, with the passing away of the world; already heavenly things are taking the place of earthly, and great things of small, and eternal things of things that fade away. What room is there here for anxiety and solicitude?"<sup>5</sup> What room indeed. Love the guest is on the way. We are not immune to the trials and tribulations of life, just as much as Christ was not, the Christ who we remember had his birth in a stable, the Christ whose birth was the beginning of the end of the sorrows of this life, whose birth set in motion our hope in God's final and complete conquering of any and every trial and tribulation. Love the guest is on the way so make your house as fair as you are able, swept clean of the worries of this life. Trim the hearth. We have already set the table. Love the guest is on the way! Sing today! Love the guest is on the way!

Let us pray: God, guide us toward humility that we might give our faith in ourselves over to you in favor of a greater faith in you, we pray. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 1*, p. 24.