

Sermon Title: Getting it Right-eous!
Text: Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36
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December 3, 2006
Memorial Presbyterian Church, Appleton, WI
First Sunday of Advent

Advent is upon us, and with it the normal hustle and bustle of the season. The lead article in last week's *Christian Century* reminded me that the celebration of these weeks before Christmas as a time of preparation and reflection, while ancient in origin, is fairly recent in practice.¹ It was, oddly, the result of Vatican II and the reforms put in motion among our Roman sisters and brothers that got *protestant* churches like us Presbyterians to begin to take notice of things like the Lectionary, and the movement of the Christian year.

It's John Buchanan, the pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, who wrote that lead article reflecting on his childhood memories of the season. He admits "Presbyterians didn't observe Advent in Western Pennsylvania in those days." It was "a new minister who introduced the congregation to the concept of a liturgical season to prepare for Christmas," and Buchanan goes on to note "He also introduced candles and a prayer of confession, which convinced some he was an agent of Rome or at the very least a closet Episcopalian."

As the Senior Pastor of the Presbyterian presence on Chicago's "Miracle Mile" he sits literally at the epicenter of the secular celebration of this season, and wonders how it is that you can hold the line when Jolly Old St. Nicholas blasts from every shop and store. "We sit in the middle of it all with somber purple color and sing hymns in a minor key." "One problem," he notes, "is that many people want to sing Christmas carols, not advent hymns. I try to tell those people about the tradition of waiting in darkness, anticipating light, but they say, 'It's so gloomy.'" And I nod, and smile. Holding on to Advent is a challenge, in world that's so anxious to run headlong into Christmas.

So why bother, when your own daughter is sizing you up for a Grinch costume and pointing out which radio stations have already begun playing Christmas music the week after Halloween? Christmas *is* wonderful, and it *does* come but once a year. Why not open things up just a bit, and let a little more of that Christmas cheer in?

The simple answer for me is that the nature of the gift that is to be given to us as we gather at the stable door in a couple of weeks is such that if we aren't careful we really *will* miss it, or trade it out at least, for something else that sneaks quickly in if all we are about in these next three weeks is a headlong rush to the ending. For all our learning and sophistication and technological advances we still are easily distracted by bright shiny objects, and this is a season that's just *full* of such things. Spending some time numbering the reasons we might *need* a Savior could well be the necessary antidote to a world that, I am quite certain, will be just as quick to put the baby Jesus back into the box as they were to get him out. By working to hold the doors, at least for these few hours when we gather for worship over the next few weeks, I wonder if we might manage to get ourselves to the place that we might have hearts open to receive, and ponder what we will see when finally "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" gives way to "Away in a Manger."

¹ John W. Buchanan, "Deepening Darkness." *The Christian Century* 123:24 (November 28, 2006) p. 3.

Who *is* this one who is coming for our salvation, and maybe even harder for us who live in a world that is for the most part designed for our comfort, what is it, again, that we need to be saved from? These are the core questions of Advent, and this year it's the vision of Jeremiah who first calls us to look off into the East at the first peaks of a new dawn that is breaking. You remember that Jeremiah, and the people to whom he spoke, were a people very much stuck in the middle of what might well have felt like the end. They had wonderful memories, passed on through generations, of the once great nation of Israel, and its legendary King David. But more recent memory was mired in conflict and compromise, economic hardships and finally humiliating conquest. These people who had understood themselves to be *God's* people had watched as their finest were led off to captivity in Babylon, and with them the last hopes of reclaiming their former glory.

But Jeremiah was a legendary contrarian—whatever seemed to be most obviously true, he insisted, was most surely *not*, and what seemed impossible was just what God had in mind. So as the death knell had been sounded for Israel's independence, his voice echoed in the deserted streets of Jerusalem: “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.” The throne of David would be restored. Justice would prevail, and then he used a word that caught me. *Righteousness* would be restored.

In fact the holy city would be renamed—no longer would it be known as $\sim\div\text{II};\text{Pv}'\text{Wry}$ —literally, “it's foundations are peace” (shalom), but it would be $\text{WnqE)d}>\text{ci}$
 $\ddot{\text{Y}}\text{hw}''\text{i}hy>$ --the Lord is our Righteousness.

Now I will grant that this is not a word much used in our day-to-day conversation. If it is, it is most likely paired with “self” to indicate someone who's just a little to full of themselves—the “self-righteous.” But as Charlotte Bronte noted in her preface to *Jane Eyre*, “Conventionality is not morality. Self-righteousness is not religion. To attack the first is not to assail the last.” We might find cause for Righteous *indignation*, but it is a cause for wonder, right here in the midst of our ramp up to Christmas, I would suggest, that *righteousness* by itself, has no obvious place. To be sure it's one of the things the harking angels sing: “Hail the Son of Righteousness” we'll belt out with gusto when finally I give you the chance. But what will we *mean* when we finally get to sing it out?

The shortened version we get, and it may well be the heart of the sickness that will infect too much of our celebration in the next few weeks: our devilish preoccupation with “getting it *right*.” The decorations just so, the perfect gift, the meal just as I remember; getting it *right* could just about kill us in the course of the next 21 days. And if your Green or White Christmas turns blue, I'm guessing it's because the inverse is true: things just don't seem *right*. They're out of kilter, out of place. “Right” in terms of “just so, and in no other way,” can exercise a tyrant's grasp on these weeks we're about to live through. But it's not what Jeremiah shouts out—what he sees dawning: it's not getting it *right* but *righteousness* that comes into our midst. But to see it, we've got to be prepared.

It's Psalm 85 that begins to put shape to what it all might mean. This was a Psalm that may well have been ringing in Jeremiah's ears, as it cries out for God's restoring love. “Will you not revive us again, so that your people may rejoice in you? Show us your steadfast love, O Lord,

and grant us your salvation.” The closing verses of the psalm almost paint a picture of the movement that the psalmist imagines as God’s saving work. Love and faithfulness meet and embrace, and in the embrace of love and faith, we find the kiss of righteousness and peace. And then the Psalmist turns the world on its edge, as faithfulness springs up from the ground, and righteousness pours down from the skies, and all creation is restored.

That’s what this season is meant for: not mad dashes to find just the right present; not deep anxiety born of fear that we’ll somehow not hang the stockings by the chimney in just such a way that old Saint Nick will deign us with his presence, but creating that sacred space in our midst where the dance of God’s faithfulness can unfold before us; love and faithfulness circling ‘round each other; righteousness and peace in embrace, and all with their arms outstretched to gather us in. It’s not that if we somehow manage to do it just so—get it *right*—that God’s presence will dawn upon us, but if we allow *God’s* righteousness to unfold around us that the truth of this most amazing story will begin to dawn on us as it dawned on Jeremiah.

What’s needed most, then, won’t be found in anything we can do, or buy; in any happy feeling we can manufacture by singing along with the department store carolers. It can’t be poured into a cup of nog, or inscribed in cards mailed off en masse to all our friends. What’s needed is *space*—*sacred* space—within which the intention of God can begin to unfold for us: God’s *righteousness*, that begins in the quietest of ways as a dance of faith, and hope, and love.

It begins when you tear off a little bit of bread, and remind yourself how deep God’s love really is for this world, that he should chose, not only to become *one* with us, but to pour himself out for us—to allow his own brokenness to become our healing. It begins when we take a cup, and share it with each other as a reminder that the story that is told was not once for them, but always for us. It begins when we free ourselves from the tyranny of self-righteousness, and learn the lesson of the fig tree: the buds set through hot summer and autumn wind that in the cold of winter begin to break, not because we will it, or want it, or make it so, but because God’s love for this world is so deep that the only good answer is to come among us, “full of grace and truth.”

It begins when we let go all right, and allow God’s righteousness to dawn. It begins when we pray with the psalmist: “Show us” like the greening buds in the depth of winter, “show us your steadfast love, O Lord, and grant us *your* salvation.”

Let us pray.