

## **ON LISTS AND LIST-MAKING**

### **JEREMIAH 33:14-16; LUKE 21:25-36**

Now is the time to prepare, to make lists, to figure out who we will remember and how we will remember them, to deck the halls and to prepare for the coming of Christmas. As “‘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,’” so is the church’s celebration of the fulfillment of this promise. The church waits, and yet we do not, because we celebrate the fulfillment of God’s promise to Israel and Judah every Sunday when we celebrate the Eucharist, when we give thanks, when we proclaim: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. Christmas has come. Christmas is coming, and Christmas will come again (as early as next month).

Before Christ comes or comes again, we have to be patient (as if we have any other option). Waiting patiently is not the same as waiting passively. If you are expecting a guest, waiting patiently may involve work that will make your home feel warmer and more welcoming than it would if you slept through the afternoon. Waiting impatiently may involve just as much work but may not be nearly as productive. As Jesus says in Luke, worrying does nothing but weigh one down. Being weighed down is not always bad. Some weights when lifted steadily strengthen the body. Other weights, the ones that Jesus condemns, distract the individual from being alert at all times. Waiting---and waiting patiently, prayerfully and penitently---calls for clarity and centeredness in a God whose faithfulness is just beneath the surface and just beyond our grasps.

Being just beneath the surface, God’s faithfulness causes righteous branches to spring up, and being just beyond our grasps, God’s faithfulness hovers over us, like a parent watching a toddler learning to walk, to catch us should we fall when taking the next step. Hebrews describes faith as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen...by faith we understand that the worlds were

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*1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent, Year C, November 29, 2009*

prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible” (which, by the way, is similar to Augustine of Hippo’s interpretation of the sacraments of as “outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace”).

For years and years, I thought about this statement of faith (and on faith) in terms of human beings. Our faith is in things hoped for. Our conviction is in things not seen. But this Scripture is taking on an entirely different meaning for me this Advent, because I am beginning to think of it in terms of God’s faithfulness, which, of course, is the faithfulness from which our faithfulness flows. God’s faithfulness meets and exceeds our expectations, and yet we fail to meet, much less exceed, God’s expectations of ours. Still, this is what God hopes for. This is what God believes. By grace, through faith, through Emmanuel’s coming, we will be as faithful to God and neighbor as God is to us.

Israel knows about promises and about being broken. The God who led them out of slavery in Egypt heard their groaning the desert. This same God watched them mourn the death of Moses and then celebrate their arrival in Canaan. Of course, Israel does not stay there. Being displaced and divided, Israel eventually becomes Israel *and* Judah, and Jeremiah reminds both of them of God’s faithfulness to them in the face of their unfaithfulness to God and to each other.

God knows more about promises being broken than Israel, and yet God continues to give and give and forgive. God gives something beautiful to Adam and Eve, and they fail to appreciate its beauty. God gives human beings vast resources, and human beings dirty them to the point that God floods the earth so that the world may be clean, and still, this is not enough. Prophets point to history and look ahead calling for faithfulness and reformation, but too often their wisdom falls on deaf ears. For Jeremiah, the “to do” list is clear: Remember God’s promise. Respond faithfully. Do justice. Be safe, and be saved. The God that we worship and serve is a God of safety and salvation. When we suffer the consequences of broken promises, God is with us. God provides shelters in storms. God forgives

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persons, and God forgives peoples, who are truly repentant and who are truly prepared for the Messiah when he comes. In this promise, there is hope, and in this hope, there is work to do and strength to do it.

Now for the somewhat disconcerting news: Jeremiah says nothing about celebrating Advent, much less how many Sundays it should be or how many candles should be lighted or what colors they should be. Jeremiah fears that Israel interprets God's covenant with them too narrowly and that temple worship has become too regimented at best and idolatrous at worst. I feel sure that the emphasis that we place on the observance of Advent would annoy him, because we are supposed to be prepared and preparing for Christ's coming each and every day. Or as Jesus says, "Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all things that may take place."

A pastor and scholar that I have come to know through my work with the Presbytery of Sheppards and Lapsley's Institute for Spiritual Formation says that the church should do away with Advent. You know me well enough to know that the mere suggestion of not observing Advent makes me cringe, but I indulged him (occupational hazard). The basis of his argument is this: Advent is something that few Presbyterians in the pew care about anymore (if they ever did). Advent is a tradition that Ministers of Word and Sacrament and a handful of self-appointed prophets in the church impose on the congregation, because it is good for them (and the "them" here refers to the leadership), and the congregation humors them and may find some value in observing Advent but only at church and only on Sundays.

I do not know about you, but this seems cynical to me, and cynicism and Advent have less in common than do Israel and Judah. Advent is hopeful and hope-filled. Cynicism is weighed down by distractions. The problem with cynicism, however, is that often it is based in truth or at least a truth

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that supports the interpretation of the situation. Sometimes cynics are right. Sometimes they prove to be prophetic, a fact that I lament.

Why do I observe Advent? Because it calls for purging that creates space for the Spirit to work in my life and in yours. It differs from Lent in that Lent leads us into a mystery that I find more difficult to understand. I understand pregnancy. I understand how babies are made and how they are born. I have looked into the faces of infants and known, beyond a shadow of doubt, that God is with us. I do not understand crucifixion. I am opposed to capital punishment. I do not understand resurrection. I studied the humanities. Not understanding something, however, is not the same as not believing it. Not understanding something that one believes is the essence of hope. It is why I observe Advent. It is why I wait for Christmas. It is why I pray and prepare and repent.

Now for a confession: One of the most peaceful and prayerful times of the year is that valley of silence between Christmas' arrival and the beginning of the secular year. The stresses associated with this time of the year, the time between Thanksgiving and Christmas, are behind me until next November, and I enter into a period of self-reflection, of list-making and planning. I set goals for myself personally and professionally, socially and spiritually, and then when everything starts up in January, I feel equipped for the journey.

This past month, actually this past week, I stopped and asked myself, "Why wait?" Why wait until December for an end-of-the-year evaluation? Isn't this why God or Jesus or the Roman Catholic Church created Advent in the first place? If I am truly committed to the rhythm of the liturgical year, shouldn't I be doing this work now? Yes, I am, and yes, I should, and I created list after list to help me think about who I am, what God is calling me to do and who God is calling me to be, and I commend this practice to you.

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But let me be clear: These are not simply “to do” lists, though some of them are. Some of them are “what-I-am-not-going-to-do” lists, because I am confident that by working through the “what-I-am-not-going-to-do” lists, God will grant me the strength to pursue the priorities that I have set.

The session deserves some of the credit for helping me to think this way, because by having our retreat on the next-to-last weekend of the liturgical year, the event jump-started my thinking about how we as a congregation live into the goals that we have discerned for next year.

In the months ahead, you will be hearing more and more about UPC’s mission statement. You will be asked to think and pray your way into a process in which many of you are already participating. Please be prepared. Prepare by preparing for Christ’s coming and by responding accordingly. Prepare by praying that we will find ways to become more just and welcoming in all that we do, that we will lead with love, because God first loved us in Jesus Christ. The days are surely coming when promises will be fulfilled. Olive branches will be extended. Justice will roll down like water, righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. In this world, there is safety. In this world, there is salvation---not just for one person or one people---but for all who are child-like and all who are humble, for all who kneel beside Bethlehem’s manger. Now to the One who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

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