

Rejoice in God's Hope

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Luke 21:25-36

December 2, 2012

The First Sunday of Advent

Bloomfield Presbyterian Church on the Green

There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations... People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world... (Luke 21:25, 26)

The first Sunday of Advent is the beginning of a new year on the church calendar, and it always starts this way: with the weird stuff, the apocalyptic end-of-the-world Bible readings that don't seem very Presbyterian and that we quite frankly don't pay a whole lot of attention to most of the rest of the year. Advent always begins with biblical prophecies and predictions of the end times that we would probably rather leave to others—like the street corner preachers and the fundamentalists.

But, here it is. Like required reading in high school, the material is before us and is part of the canon and well worth our careful attention:

Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near. (Luke 21:27, 28)

Is this stuff Presbyterian? Yes, actually. It is. Generally speaking, we Presbyterians don't try to turn the apocalyptic language of poetry into a historical time line for predicting the exact end of the world. But the essence of the words is central to our faith: *Christ will come again.*

Christ will come again and this will be a good thing. When it happens we will want to "stand up and raise our heads" (21:28), because his coming will be our redemption. He will come as redeemer, which means savior, which is good. Not only does the Presbyterian Church believe this stuff, we start each new year in the church by reminding ourselves of it. It's that important.

Great is the mystery of faith:

Christ has died.

Christ has risen.

Christ will come again.

You've heard those words during Communion liturgies in Protestant and Roman Catholic churches. The earliest Christians expected Jesus to return in their lifetime. When that didn't happen, they adjusted their thinking—leaving the when-where-and-how of it to God and focusing instead on the promise itself and what it meant on a practical day-to-day basis.

OK, then, what does the promise mean for us on a practical day-to-day basis? I think it means *everything*. The way I see it, we—you and I—are characters in the story of Christ's return. Let me explain.

In the story of Christ's coming the first time around, Isaiah and John the Baptist and the shepherds and wise men were "main characters." And in the backdrop of that story are a host of other characters: the generations of the faithful who waited with hope for a Messiah and lived faithfully

while they waited. Imagine a nativity scene, Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, etc. surrounded by multitudes of the faithful who had been waiting, one generation after another, for the Messiah.

Now, in this present era, the story of Christ's second coming is being written: the story of Christ's return. There will be some "main characters" in the story of Christ's return, and there will also be those generations of the faithful who wait with hope and live faithfully while they wait. That's where we come in. We are part of an ongoing story, and our role is to prepare the world for Christ's grand finale.

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Jesus was born in Bethlehem—which was known as "the least" of the cities of Judah—but he was *from* Nazareth, which was about as special back then as being from, say, Newark is today. Despite its small size and stature, Bethlehem was, historically, the seat of the kings of the "house & lineage" (Luke 2:4) of David. Nazareth by contrast had no such reputation. It was average and ordinary in every way.

The implication for us in our day-to-day living is that ***every place matters***. Christ will come again, and anywhere is an option. The Holy One of Israel, Christ the King, our risen Lord and merciful savior, is as likely to choose the corner of Broad Street & Bloomfield Avenue as anywhere else for the venue for his big moment... And isn't that amazing?!

When Christ comes again, he could show up anywhere. And that means that every place matters. Newark matters. Bloomfield matters. Right here... matters.

Wouldn't our days be transformed if we brought that conviction—that kernel of hope—with us every place we went? Running in to the Quick Check to buy milk. Hmm. Maybe here? Stuck in traffic commuting to work on the Garden State Parkway. Hmm, maybe here? Watching the teenagers come and go from Bloomfield High School right across the street. Hmm. Maybe here?

Every place counts.
Likewise, every person counts.

Think of the characters in the Christmas story: a poor pregnant woman, a carpenter, an innkeeper during the busy season, local shepherds, and wise men from "the east." People of varying backgrounds and occupations, most of them poor, were chosen to attend to and celebrate the birth.

In the story yet to be written, the story of Christ's return, the folks who come here once a month when we "Feed the World on the Green" are as likely as anyone else to be chosen by God for a major role.

How would our relationships be transformed if we brought that conviction—that kernel of hope—with us into our encounters with each and every person in our lives? The people we live with and work with. Our neighbors, including the aggravating ones. Children. People of other social classes than our own. Prisoners and ex-convicts. Alcoholics and recovering alcoholics. These could be gathered around Christ in the tableau of his second coming. *And so could you.*

Regardless of who the main characters end up being, when Christ returns, we will have played our parts. For every main character in the Bible, there are hundreds upon hundreds who never get a mention, but who are part of the story: those who kept the faith, those who returned to the Lord when they had gone astray, those who taught their children by word and example. They are the singers of

songs, tellers of stories, keepers of the law, doers of justice. They are on every page of the Bible if you just look carefully.

And so are you. Yes, you, the members and friends of Bloomfield Presbyterian Church on the Green. You are keeping the faith. You are returning to the Lord when you go astray. You are teaching your children by word and example. You are singers of songs, tellers of stories, keepers of the law, doers of justice & kindness. You are filling the pages of this present era of Christian history. You are waiting and preparing for Christ to come again. You are keeping Christian hope alive.

Every place counts.

Every person counts.

Likewise, every detail is significant.

Filling goody bags with candy for lonely men and women far from home: is significant. Singing in a choir, visiting an shut-in, studying the Bible at Circle meetings, putting one's hard earned money in the offering plate—these are significant.

Opening your doors to those who can't afford to pay for food, or to those who are trying to stay clean and sober; or to those who don't feel they belong in other places but find that they can belong here: these acts of the church are significant. They are expressions of hope.

I hope you feel genuinely proud of what you do as the Bloomfield Presbyterian Church on the Green. I am proud of you. And I am proud to be joining you as your new pastor.

I have been on the job a whole week-and-a-half now! But I am a good listener and I have been listening to you carefully. If there is one belief that I think all or almost all of you share, it is this: that **God wants *this church to be here***. Am I right?

You matter. Bloomfield matters. And the details of what we do here as a church matter.

Christ died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again, and that is all we really need to know to sustain us in the joyful work of ministry in his name. That is all we really need to know to have hope. Therefore let us rejoice: rejoice in God's hope.

If the shape of the future were up to us human beings alone, there would be no end to the excuses we could find to crumple up into little balls of utter hopelessness. But it is not. The shape of the future is not up to us alone but will be determined by the promises of God. This is what we mean when say: Christ will come again. And this is the abiding truth that can we can draw upon to motivate us to keep on keeping on: moving forward with hope.

'Tis the season of Advent. 'Tis the season to be hopeful. But the truth of the matter is: we are an Advent people in every season. We live in joyful anticipation of Christ's return, his second Advent, and we play our parts, year-round, standing on the promises, loving and serving the Lord.

Every place, every person, and every detail matters.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel, O Bloomfield, O All the World.

To the glory of God. Amen.

~Rev. Ruth Boling