

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT C

Jeremiah 33: 14-16; Psalm 25; I Thessalonians 3: 12-4:2; Luke 21: 25-28, 34-36

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

I find Advent is a wonderful time to preach from the prophets and so that is where I begin today. We preachers need a little encouragement to branch out from automatically turning to the gospel selection for our preachings maybe these following thoughts will help us take the plunge and preach from the first reading. You might even want to try that throughout Advent—it's a good stretching exercise. (Thanks to the participants at the preaching conference at the College of St. Elizabeth, New Jersey, for the work we did together on this passage.)

Through Jeremiah, God promises, "...I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and Judah." Naturally, I want to ask, "What promise was that?" What was the promise God made and intends to keep? I first notice that there is a strange mix in this statement from Jeremiah: "I will fulfill...." It sounds very definitive, no doubts about God's intention. But it has an ambiguity as well—when will this happen? We are not given a clue. That's the way the bible is when it talks about the future. We don't get to know the date a promised event will happen; what we do get is a definite promise that it will. Jeremiah, like other prophets, isn't talking about the future; not "prophesying" in the popular sense of the word. Even when they mention a future event, prophets are addressing the present. It is in the present that we need reassurance; need to hear a word of encouragement from God--- especially in arduous times.

The promise is spelled out in the next verse: God promised David (through Nathan cf. 2 Sam 7: 8-16) that his line would last forever. Now Jeremiah repeats that promise: a new ruler in David's line is coming — a "just shoot". The people came to identify this "just shoot" with the messiah. When the messiah came, righteousness would be declared upon the land, justice would be the rule. Then, "Judah shall be safe and Jerusalem shall dwell secure...." You can see why this reading was chosen for the first Sunday in Advent. The people are yearning for what we all yearn. We want to live together in peace and security. We want good leaders, men and women we can trust to guide us in being just; leaders who will see to the needs of all, not just those who can buy patronage through contributions to campaign funds. We want a nation where none are left out; where the weak and

vulnerable are counted as important; where no one lacks, but all have what is needed for a full life. This is a reading for a desolate people living in exile, who need to know that God has not abandoned them. To have hope in the future can make the hard present bearable. Hope can also fortify our intentions to hasten the future by doing something about present inequalities. To repeat: the prophets are more concerned about the present than the future.

We believe that Jesus is the fulfillment of the promise God made through Jeremiah. He is the one who has come and has yet to come. With Jesus' arrival God's justice, peace and security has been declared. Now we know what the fulfillment of the promise looks like—it looks like Jesus. In him we have our ultimate safety; all other securities will prove to be fickle and false. In Christ, the "just shoot," we are called to be signs of God's promise in the world. We are invited to: act as Jesus did; speak out against injustice; stand on the side of the outcast; forgive those who offend us; protect life in all its forms; feed the poor, etc.

There are three cycles in the Lectionary. In each of the first Advent Sundays, the gospel selections are apocalyptic, they are about the end of the world and the coming of Christ—as Luke puts it today, "in power and great glory". The message is straight forward, and a mood is set: the beginning of Advent is not yet about cribs and shepherds. Advent starts with the reminder that God will make a powerful intervention into human history. While our faith assures us that Christ will return, it doesn't tell us when. Luke says that Christ's coming will dismay and frighten people; but believers are to have courage---- "your redemption is at hand."

But the passage hints that the delay in the Parousia has caused some in Luke's community to slacken in their faith, have anxieties and turn to "carousing and drunkenness." Luke's community was undergoing suffering and injustice. Maybe people had grown so discouraged that they turned to other outlets ("carousing and drunkenness," can be applied to myriad avoidance activities. Maybe too, they had given up on God's ability to keep the promises God had made to prophets like Jeremiah and through Jesus. Luke is trying to encourage a beleaguered church and remind them that God is still sovereign and has a time set for the great events that herald the "Son of Man's" return. Luke wants believers to say, "We are ready to meet the Lord when he comes, and in the meantime, we are standing firm witnessing to his name.

What an awkward topic! Try talking of the second coming at your next dinner party. That is a sure-fired way to kill a conversation and earn weird looks. Indeed, it is hard to see Good News in the destruction of the world as we know it, even if it does mean that "redemption is at hand". Who could possibly hear Good News in today's gospel? We seem so enmeshed in the way the world is and so, talk of its ending, sounds very threatening.

But we preachers need to probe more deeply and ask: What distress and discontent lie below the exterior "happy face" people show to the world? What pain do people silently endure? For what healing touch do they yearn? What can the preacher say to stir up the hungers we all feel—no matter how comfortable we appear on the outside? In addition, we mustn't forget that we in the first world are privileged. (Though even in our comfortable land there are people suffering deprivation.) Those in lands where survival is the issue; where daily life feels like the world is shattering and collapsing--- these are the very people who long for the end of the world they know. There is a man I know doing hard time in a maximum-security prison who cheers for the Parousia. "End it all!", he tells the Lord. So, in one way or another, we all hunger for a new world. Today we name the hunger and pray we can have some part in God's plan to bring about a new world order.

The appeal Advent holds for many worshipers is that it provides the space, time, words, prayer and rituals to say what's on their minds and in their hearts. Things are not right and so the preacher names what's "not yet right" and hopes to stir up a hunger for the world that God envisions for us, plus, a desire to do what we can to set things right. We can't make it happen; we can't control when the Lord will stand anew among us. So, taking his advice, we stand vigilant, keeping our eyes awake to catch the many ways he is already present among us. While we wait for God's promise to be completed, Advent is a time to be renewed; to unplug our ears to God's voice speaking through the scriptures and in the surrounding world.

It feels strange to have Thanksgiving on Thursday this week, followed right away by this first Sunday of Advent. Seems like a clash between our daily lives "out there" and our liturgical life "in here." Like the people of Jeremiah's time, we are engaged in daily struggle to be faithful to our God. So, we might combine the two calendar events by inviting people to give thanks for a faithful God who stands with us while we live our lives anticipating the Savior's coming.

ADVENT POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

This may be a good work this Advent. Write to someone on death row--- who probably feels hopeless. Let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, People of Faith against the Death Penalty.

Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to...

- James Jaynes #0206197 (On death row since 6/4/99)
- James Morgan #0291861 (7/8/99)
- David Gainey #0139378 (7/13/99)
- Billy Anderson #007328 (10/26/99)

-----Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

A SEASONAL PRAYER FOR ADVENT

Thanks be to you, O God, that life is marked by celebration, that the ordinariness of day-to-day life is broken by occasions of festivity and giving and togetherness.

Thanks be to you, O God, that life is also marked by transition; that we can now leave the old and look to the new with some renewed sense of hope and expectation.

Thanks be to you, O God, for life in relationship with family and with friends, and all thanks that we are changed in this life together, that faith is called out of us, that purpose is revived, that grace is extended.

All thanks to you, O God, for each occasion when life is so good, so abundant, and so full of love that we wonder if our experience can contain it. Amidst our thanksgiving hear also our intercession, for life too is tenuous, difficult, and ambiguous.

We are hoping that incarnation is still a reality, that you are still involved in our lives and in our world. We are summoned to celebrate your coming, yet it is your absence we so often experience.

Where are you when our talk of love and freedom is belied in lives of

insensitivity and smallness? Where are you when the desire to be accepted or the need to get ahead makes us hurt those for whom we care or makes us oblivious to the feelings of those about us? Where are you when, despite our wealth and good intentions we cannot keep the very residents of our own city clothed and fed and housed in a decent place?

We do not know; we are not sure. Life is not settled, and so we must, even now, hope. So then, hear our prayers for those whose hope is so small, so petty, so sensible. Hear our prayers for those for whom the need to control life makes faith imperceptible. Hear our prayers for all who are victims in this world — victims of senseless aggression or of prejudice, victims of society's misplaced values or of their own poor judgments. Hear our prayers for those whose experiences of loss or disappointment or disillusionment make life painful, especially amidst days of celebration.

Now give us courage, courage to forgive ourselves, courage to live gracefully amidst uncertainties, courage to let go and live. Continue to save us in and through this Christ of incarnation. Amen

-----James C Leach, in *Pulpit Digest*, NOVEMBER / DECEMBER 1988 I (477)p. 57-58.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Our webpage addresses: <https://www.PreacherExchange.com>

"First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, [Click Here](#).

If you would like to support this ministry, [Click Here](#) to make a secure tax-deductible online donation.

Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,
Jude Siciliano, OP
FrJude@JudeOP.org