

# Hoping Light Returns

Jeremiah 33:1-14, Luke 21:29-36  
Hudson United Methodist Church  
Rev. Dr. Dawn Jeffers Ramstad  
The first Sunday of Advent, 2021 A. D.  
28 November 2021



Dear Readers,

Holidays in this second year of our Covid era look different than last year's holidays. Also, they look the same. How we have adapted represents our greatest change. Now in addition to hand washing, mask wearing, and social distancing we make use of both vaccines and treatments. Our hospitalization rates are just as high, but our death rates are lower.

Last year, our worship team set aside our plans for observing Advent by reading the Old Testament prophets anticipating Christ's arrival. Instead we focused on "Angels All Around." Thanks to our internet ministry, those services are still available on YouTube and those sermons are still available by calling Kathy and asking for a reprint. Last year, we believed we would all benefit from the comfort of familiar Scriptures. We focused on how angels arrived with various people in Jesus' birth story—his cousin, his mother, his adoptive father—and provided them with love in a hard time.

This year we went back to our plans for our Advent worship to draw on the Old Testament readings. In them the prophets Joel, Jeremiah, and Malachi invite us to begin looking for Christ. We began last week by focusing on Joel sharing God's invitation to the divine feast as we prepared our hearts for American Thanksgiving. This week Jeremiah brings us a theme of looking for Christ's arrival, echoed in Jesus' teaching to prepare for what we can see will come next. Next week, our readings from Malachi and Luke ponder how we can recognize Christ's presence in our lives.

Although our Scriptures contain ancient wisdom, they are also a means God uses to speak to us in our current situation(s). This first week of Advent, please join me in thinking about what it means to look for Christ again by lighting candles in Advent while darkness grows with every day. Light always wins!

May the hope of Christmas light your season. Rev. Dawn

Friends, will you please pause for a moment of silent prayer? (Readers, please take a few breaths of time to pray where you are before reading on. Thank you.)

Lord, we trust you to make your ways know to us.

Lead us in your truth, teach it to us,

because your truth is our path of salvation. Amen.<sup>1</sup> (Inspired by Psalm 25)

Both Jeremiah and Jesus lived in an occupied Israel, but it was not the same occupation. In Jeremiah's time the occupiers were Babylonians. In Jesus' time the occupiers were Romans. In both times the people remembered "how it used to be" when David and his descendants ruled Israel. They longed for the "good old days." Both Jeremiah and Jesus offered their contemporaries words of hope.

Our shared experience of over the last twenty months with Covid has similarities with living in an occupied country. We have vague and confusing new regulations. This week we received news of another new variant now sweeping our globe. We are weary and frustrated. We feel our traditions changed as holidays now include memories of our first Covid Christmas that alter our plans. We begin to doubt if anything resembling our old life will ever come again. We need words of hope.

The Church celebrates Christmas on December 25<sup>th</sup> every year because unless a holiday remembers Christ's resurrection, our church year follows a solar calendar that is rooted in agriculture. (Pardon the pun.) As we northerners make our annual journey around our sun, we all see that from late June to late December there is less and less light daily while our temperatures get colder and colder. Every day, sunrise is a few minutes later and sunset a few minutes earlier. The daily darkness grows until the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year, generally December 21st. The observation we can all observe on our own by December 25<sup>th</sup> that our days are growing longer.

Light is coming again.

Thankfully, some unnamed leader in the early church tied the holiday of Christmas with our observable return of sunlight. Thankfully, human memory of December's darkness reminds us to bring light in to this darkness as we hope the light of the world, Christ, will keep his promise and return.

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<sup>1</sup> Inspired by Psalm 25.

In that spirit of common feelings and observations, a few of Jeremiah's words for today ended with hope. "The time is coming, declares the LORD, when I will fulfill my gracious promise." (Jeremiah 33:14) The rest of his prophecy we believe was fulfilled with Jesus' birth, a new king from the line of David. Another year, that may be a good sermon. This year, we need to remember a time is coming when the LORD will fulfill his gracious promise. I know that I need hope. How about you?

Let's spend this Advent of 2021 dwelling in hope that the LORD will fulfill his gracious promise and these hard times will soon be a memory future non-historians will probably forget ever happened.

Every year with the winter solstice, gardeners begin planning their gardens for next summer. Non-gardeners may think we are rushing the season, like box stores retailers filling empty holiday shelves with valentines and St. Paddy's tchotchkes while folks are lining up to exchange Christmas gifts. But gardeners know they are not rushing. Some bulbs need cold to germinate and here in the upper Midwest tomato seeds need time under grow lights for a good harvest next August. Winter solstice says to them, "Gardeners, check your notes, get set, plan!"

Today's Gospel reading paired with God's promise in Jeremiah could be a gift to the church from preachers who garden. We, who both follow Christ and carefully observe the seasons, know creation's time is always cyclical and believe a time is coming when Christ will fulfill his gracious promise to return. It makes sense to preachers who garden that in dark times as winter's deepest cold begins, we should ponder Jesus' teaching that we should watch for light's return to be followed by spring's arrival.

At Como Park in the Conservatory lives only fig tree I know of near enough for us to literally observe it as we follow Jesus. Who doesn't love visiting the Conservatory during the coldest parts of winter primarily because it is free and the humidity that sustains our fig tree also relieves our suffering from dry air? I have noticed our local fig tree begins to make new leaves while walking slowly through the Conservatory in late January; months ahead of the maples and elms that grow well here in the church neighborhood, whose swelling leaf buds in late February remind us it is almost too late to get our tomato seedlings potted and under our grow lights.

Jesus said we should be prepared for his return. He cautions us against allowing our hearts to become dulled by "drinking parties, drunkenness, and the anxieties of day-to-day life." Jesus never said, "Don't party." He celebrated holidays, especially

those that involved a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The Bible does not call us just to fast, but also to feast, both part of life's complete cycle.

So how can we keep our hope alive in hard times?

Here are three suggestions. Please try one.

First, keep a tradition, even if you must adapt it. For an example, let's think about candle lighting in December's dark. In worship, our church lights the four candles of our Advent wreath, one the first week, two the second, and so on, as our countdown to Christmas. This reminds us Christ is the light of the world, and while darkness around us is increasing, so is Christ's light.

Many of us carry worship home by having an Advent wreath on the table where we eat. You may have a family heirloom. But what if your mom is still using the heirloom on her table, or you gave it to your son because you have made the move to senior housing where burning candles is not allowed? Adapt. Buy a small wreath at a craft store or the dollar store and four battery operated votive candles. Lay the wreath on a table and light those battery powered votives as if you were in church. It will feel odd that first year to click on a battery candle; however seeing its light can invoke memories of home and hope of your faith tradition being passed to another generation. When Christmas is passed, put your battery candle wreath away in your new, small box of Advent/Christmas decorations. When you get that same wreath out again next year, you won't be adapting any more, you will be keeping your tradition.

Second, review your memories. With supplies as simple as a dollar store notebook and an advertising pen, write your memories. You can make a list. You can write chapters. It is unlikely that you are writing the world's next great book, but it will help you find forgotten traditions, ways of "keeping Christ in Christmas" that may have been overlooked in our hectic decade before Covid arrived. Some things to write about may include your memories of our recent past, last year and 2019; the first time you became St. Nicholas' helper; or (if you are old enough) your first Christmas away from home.

Third, include Christ in everyday of Advent. Pick one of Jesus' teachings and make it an Advent resolution. For me, when I hear a challenge like this one, I always think about how Jesus' let the crowds go home while he went alone outside to pray. They say that if you can go outside, that is the best. But I get busy, and this good intention is one I feel I should resolve to tend. What is your spiritual habit that you feel you should tend to? Whatever it is do the best you can do to remember Christ rather than focusing on what you cannot do.

A World War I vet had aged to the point where he spent his last weeks and days in a highly adapted bed. His body was failing but his mind was clear. The only room available for his bed on our skilled nursing unit meant his bed must be placed in a specific place that left him with a window view of a gray cement wall. This vet was a bird watcher! Our occupational therapy staff found him a mobile of birds cut out from photographs. Sure, it was not the same as hiking through fields with a good friend and a pair of binoculars. But his helped him remember better days as he looked at the mobile. His faith gave him hope for birding again when he arrived in heaven.

Friends, our old times will never return. But our hard times will pass, and God will fulfill our hopes. These next four weeks, keep Advent. Hope for light's return. Observe a tradition. Reflect on your past. Take time to be with Christ every day.

Christ will come again. Keeping a good Advent in hard time will help you be alert and ready for that great day when it arrives.

May the light of hope guide you in this season.

Amen.