

The Branch

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee
December 4, 2016
Second Sunday of Advent – Year A
Isaiah 11:1-10



The great comedian of the early to mid-twentieth century, Groucho Marx, was asked on the occasion of his seventieth birthday how he would want people to think of him in a hundred years. Without missing a beat, he said, “He looks remarkably good for his age.”

I thought about that quote when I read a recent column by Roger Cohen. He writes, “I listened this week to an inventor, a brilliant man convinced of the proximity of human immortality, which he believes to be just a couple of medical bridges away. He’s taking dozens of pills to ensure that he reaches the first of those bridges, perhaps around 2030. I confess immortality, whose attainment is a hot theme in Silicon Valley, does not interest me.”

And just as I was reading Cohen’s words, I got a text message that my friend Harold had died. Harold was a pastor in Pennsylvania, one of the people in my Doctor of Ministry class, one of the tight-knit groups of friends that gather at Austin Seminary for two weeks at a time twice a year. Last January, Harold didn’t seem himself those two weeks, and it wasn’t long after that term ended we learned he was diagnosed with cancer. He battled for a year now, but at a young age, with three children, and a church that loved him, Harold died.

The text message our group of friends got just said, “Harold died this morning. With that news, I hold you all a little closer in my heart today, always giving thanks for our group.”

And then someone responded, “Heartbreaking. Love you all.”

And then someone else, “Heart sick. I love you friends.”

And so it went. It was as if that word of death, of someone beloved to us gone, had reminded us to say it, to not lose sight of the importance of saying the words to those we love, *that* we love them.

And that sent me back to the columnist I had just been reading with new eyes. I will admit I was skimming more than reading, and the memory of something he said drew me back to the screen, and the beginning of his column:

“A friend once told me about going to see her father shortly before he died. He had advanced Alzheimer’s and peered at her blankly. Then he said: ‘You are home.’

‘Yes, Dad,’ she said. ‘I’m your daughter.’

He said, ‘I had you too much under my thumb.’

“Home, and what constitutes it, is the most potent of memories. It’s not excess of love we regret at death’s door; it’s excess of severity. If we lived every day as the last day of our lives, the only quandary would be how to find the time to shower love on enough people. We live distracted.”

Advent, if it is anything, is a reminder, voiced by the prophets, of the importance of time. Not the time that we mark with I Watches and calendars, what the Greeks called “chronos” time, where we get the word “chronology.” That’s the kind of time that makes Groucho Marx want to look good for his age at 170, or a man taking dozens of pills in the pursuit of immortality. Chronos time is the time that makes us do all manner of things to stall the march of time, or at least hide its effects. And chronos time is the time we are enthralled to and perhaps enslaved by as we fill our calendars with more and more things and perpetually complain that there’s just not enough time.

But Advent is not about that kind of time. Not that there haven’t been many who have tried to make it about the calendar, who have tried to read the scriptures and the times in which we live and figure out precisely when Jesus is coming. I remember “88 Reasons Why Jesus Will Return in 1988,” and a host of other similar things that tried to say Advent is all about that day, way out there, when Jesus is coming.

It is easy to read, for instance, today’s text, and come away thinking that it is all about some future day, a day when the Spirit of the Lord will cause a shoot to emerge out of the apparently dead stump, when the Spirit will create a world where we return to Eden – the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them...a day when “they will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, a day when the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”

It is easy for us, if we choose to view everything as chronos time, to look around and say, “That day has not yet come.” There are still wars and rumors of wars; righteousness and faithfulness and peace seem like dreams, but not realities.

But there is another kind of time, what the Greeks called “Kairos” time, God’s time. This is time that cannot be placed on a calendar. It cannot be predicted or planned. It is both coming and already here. In the darkness, we can walk by its coming light.

The point of Isaiah’s vision, it seems to me, is not that we must sit around and wait for the day to come, but can begin living now as if it has come. This was Isaiah’s cry to his people, to not only imagine a new day of harmony and peace, but to recognize those places where it is already breaking forth and join in what God is doing, to recognize it is possible to step into kairos time even as we live in chronos.

I got a Facebook message the other day from someone I haven’t spoken to in years. She was one of the youth in a previous church, and she had a question. “Do you believe that miracles still happen?”

I answered her question with a question. “Why do you ask?”

She went on to describe something that had just happened to her. In order to maintain the confidentiality of her story, I will simply say that the one thing she did not believe was possible in a situation, but for which she had prayed fervently, happened. She didn’t know how to process it, and was inclined, by training and education, to dismiss anything of a divine cause, and to see it as more of a coincidence, as she put it, a one-off.

I was living with this text and Isaiah’s dream of a king on David’s throne at a time when it was an historical impossibility. He dares to dream of a king whose rule breaks down all the natural barriers. Lions become vegetarians and the whole earth is covered in a peace and wholeness as vast as the sea. It is a return to Eden, a long procession of the world’s kings and dominions following a toddling king.

And then I thought about Harold, and how all those fervent prayers his wife and children, and all of us prayed, and how the news, when we received it, felt like they had not been answered. Where is God in all these things? How can one person experience the completely unexpected outcome for which she has been praying and call that a miracle, and another not. What do you call that?

Isaiah would say, I think, it is all miracle. The next breath we take, this beautiful world, all that opens before us does not come from us, so it is all miracle. And we

believe, in Jesus Christ, that Kairos time has flooded into our world in such a way that miracles abound. Do we have eyes to see? It seems that is the only question.

So I wrote her back and said that I believed God was always at work in the world, bringing life and light, and that most of the time we are too distracted to see that work. Sometimes it takes a big thing, a jarring thing, a wolf living with a lamb thing, to cause us to see what is always there – the grace of God, the love of God, the justice and peace of God, at work, always at work. The day has not come in its fullness, the world is not yet what God intends it to be. But the day does break all around us. The vision of the prophet, the life of Jesus, these show us what can be, and what by God's grace will be, and what we can see even now. So, yes, I said, I do believe in miracles. But that one thing that happened to you, that's not the only miracle in your life. They are all around.

I think that's what we were all sensing when Harold died, how easy it is to live distracted, how much we take for granted, how we miss all those moments when the lion and the lamb dwell together. We were jarred awake enough to say it – I love you. You are all cherished. We were all trying to open our eyes.

Isaiah says that a branch can emerge from a stump, life from death, that the world can change, that miracles are all around. May you have Advent eyes to see, really see, God's Kairos time in the midst of your time, and when you see it, name it for the miracle it is – don't keep it to yourself. *You* be the prophet that points to God at work. May it be so. Amen.