

Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

“Stand Up and Raise Your Heads!”

Old Testament Lesson

Jeremiah 23:1-8 (NRSV)

¹ Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! Says the LORD.

² Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the LORD. ³ Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. ⁴ I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the LORD.

⁵ The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ⁶ In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: “The LORD is our righteousness.”

⁷ Therefore, the days are surely coming, says the LORD, when it shall no longer be said, “As the LORD lives who brought the people of Israel up out of the land of Egypt,” ⁸ but “As the LORD lives who brought out and led the offspring of the house of Israel out of the land of the north and out of all the lands where he had driven them.” Then they shall live in their own land.

Gospel Lesson

Luke 21:25-36 (NRSV)

²⁵ “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. ²⁶ People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷ Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. ²⁸ Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

²⁹ Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; ³⁰ as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. ³¹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³² Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. ³³ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³⁴ “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, ³⁵ like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶ Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

Bible/Sermon Focus

The season of Advent marks the beginning of the church calendar year. (Happy new year, church!) Every single year we come back to this fresh, new time; this season of expectation. But what exactly are we expecting? A baby, born in a manger? A savior? What child is this?

In our scripture from Jeremiah, we hear a bit of what is called the *messianic expectation*; the people's expectation that a messiah would come save them. The messianic expectation begins during the exile.

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Once the people of God had been freed from the land of Egypt, they wandered through the wilderness under the leadership of Moses. There, in the wilderness they were given the *law*. This law was what we today would call both secular and religious. But for the people of God these terms were one in the same. God expected the people to live a certain way to be in right relationship with creation, each other, and with God. God and the people made a covenant, a promise with each other. The people would be faithful to God and God would remain faithful to them.

After the people left the wilderness, they entered into the promised land and settled. This is the time of "the judges." No longer a nomadic people they began to plant and to build. The law was interpreted by a few members of the community, called judges. The judges were representatives from each tribe, and were expected to protect the people from foreign enemies as well as interpret the law, making sure that the covenant was upheld.

As time went on the people of God noticed that other nations had kings and decided they wanted a king. God thought it was a terrible idea but when the people insisted, God gave them a king. God sent a prophet named Samuel to anoint both the first king of Israel (Saul) and the second king of Israel (David). This is where the idea of a messiah first began to form. Messiah means "anointed one." These kings were indeed, anointed. Saul was a pretty shabby king, but David did so well that God promised someone from the line of David would always sit on the throne – forever!

Now that the nation of Israel had a king (an anointed one), it would be the role of the king to protect the people from their foreign enemies. It was also the king who would establish justice and the practice of the law amongst the people. The king was not only to govern, but to be the embodiment of the covenant between God and the people of God. The people of God knew themselves to be a people freed and redeemed from slavery. The law was given by God to maintain this covenantal relationship between God and God's people. The king was to live into this law, to uphold this law, to administer justice to those who broke the law. You were supposed to be able to look at the life and actions of the King and see the embodiment of how Israel was to live.

God gave them a king. But, like most kings, the kings of Israel struggled. They did build a temple and for a while were able to protect the people. But they did not lead righteous lives and were not the example or arbitrator of God's law as they promised to be. The least of these, who had protection under the law (the widows, orphans, and foreigners) remained oppressed

and exploited. The gap between the upper and lower class grew with protections only for the rich. There was a civil war and the nation was torn in two.

Eventually both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah fell. The final blow was the ransacking and destruction of Jerusalem (including the temple) in 586 BCE by the nation of Babylon. Babylon took the leaders and well-educated of Israel back to their major cities and forced them to work for Babylon. This was the exile. When the people of God were exiled to Babylon, from their homelands, leaving a diaspora. The people believed that this happened to them because they didn't uphold the law, because they broke their covenant with God and had exploited the least of these among them.

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The destruction of the temple and the removal of a leader from David's line shattered the group imaginary of the people of God. What would they do now? Who could protect them? It was at this point in history that the people began to imagine that God would send a savior, a messiah. This messiah would bring them back to their land, rule with justice over the people, and protect them from these foreign armies. In their minds, the messiah will be an actual king on actual throne, a great military ruler, someone like David. Someone who would maintain the law and make sure we remain faithful to our covenant with God.

And this is what we hear in the text from Jeremiah today, this David-like, messianic expectation. Jeremiah blames the bad shepherds (leaders) for scattering the people and promises that God will gather the people together again, and raise up new shepherds to care for the people, and to help them keep the law. And maybe with *THIS* messiah, the people will *finally* get it right!

And the people waited, and waited. There were times when some of the people believed that the messiah had come. There were leaders who claimed to be the messiah. And often, they looked the same. A person of great military prowess claiming the ability to give the land back to the people and to destroy the enemies of the nation. Some even believed that this messiah would come down from the heavens in a great overthrow (like we hear in our text from Luke).

That was the expectation. Even the disciples of Jesus knew that was the expectation. What they got was...well...different.

So, as we enter the season of Advent, we sense that expectancy once again. We anticipate the arrival of the Messiah again. This time, what do we expect? Who do we expect to show up at the end of this season?

Discussion Questions

1. What kind of messiah were the people expecting? Where else have you seen/heard/read that expectation in the Old Testament?
2. Ask someone to read or sing *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*. What kind of messiah are you hoping for this Advent?

3. Was there a time in your life when you placed an expectation on God? Did God deliver the outcome as you expected?
4. Reflect on this quote from Pastor Andy, *"We dare to imagine who God incarnate will actually be, what they will bring with them, who will they come for, what will they do once they get here. And since we know the end of the story, we have to liberate our expectations from their inevitable and perfectly understandable nostalgia. The question of the season is: How do we prevent our expectations from being predetermined by what we assume to be true?"*
5. Reflect on this quote from Rev. Dr. Eboni Marshall Turman, *"Jesus' life reveals something to us about the nature of God that must always be held in tension with the sufferings of the cross; that is, that by grace, God is in the flesh."*

Prayer

O come, Emmanuel. O come, thou Wisdom from on high, order all things and cause us in her ways to go. O come, great Lord of might, giver of the law. O come, thou Root of Jesse's tree, before whom rulers fall silent. Come, Lord. Come and shatter our expectations again. Amen.

*"Jesus' life reveals something to us about the nature of God that must always be held in tension with the sufferings of the cross; that is, that by grace, God is in the flesh."
- Rev. Dr. Eboni Marshall Turman*