

The First Sunday of Advent  
November 29, 2015

**"GOOD NEWS OR BAD NEWS?"**

*by Mary Anne Biggs*

Jeremiah 33:14-16 ~ Luke 21:25-36

As much as I miss Emily and Matt Krusack and little Abigail, I especially miss them today, because as you know, Emily is expecting another baby and what better symbol of Advent could we have than a woman great with child? That's the meaning of Advent, isn't it? A new birth is on the way! We're all looking forward to it. Someone special is coming who will bring a great change ... new life and beauty and the challenge to grow. Everything will be different after that blessed event ... life will never be the same. We don't completely know yet what it will be like, but we expect a great joy. And won't it be wonderful ... won't we feel fulfilled when the promised day arrives at last? As we have just celebrated the birth of our granddaughter, Clementine, I still get a little misty over this. It seems like they will never come ... and then they come suddenly ... and even though you've had all this time to get ready ... you still aren't ready. But when the time comes, ready or not, you have no choice, that baby is coming!

Anyway, unless one of you wants to make a big announcement this morning that you are great with child we are lacking the visible symbol for reasons beyond my control, but I want you to *imagine* a woman great with child today. Think of the young woman Isaiah pointed out to King Ahaz, back in the days when Syria and Israel marched their armies against Jerusalem, and King Ahaz and his soldiers camped outside the city walls where their hearts shook like the trees in the forest shake when the breeze blows. But here comes old Isaiah, the prophet priest, out from the city gates. He waves a bony finger in the King's face and says: "Ahaz, you wimp! Have some backbone! Have some faith! Look over there at that young lady about to bear a son ... and before he is weaned those kings will fall and our God will deliver us." Can you see her? It's the moment of crisis. Armies are marching against us. The clouds of war are gathering on the horizon. They are too many, and we don't stand a chance. This could be the end of us. But no! This pregnant young woman carries the future. She carries our hope. Her child represents the God who will be with us against all odds ... in all our tomorrows.

Or think of the little girl to whom the angel appeared. Mary, all but married ... promised by her parents to old Joseph the carpenter. The arrangement had already been made ... promises exchanged. They're just waiting for Mary to be old enough to leave her parents and take up her life as an adult, a wife, a homemaker for the old widower. But something is growing inside Mary. She is pregnant, even though she and Joseph have never been together. The family is ashamed. They don't know who the father is. They love their daughter, but they are so angry with her. To make matters worse she tells some story about an angel announcing that her child will be the Messiah, the Deliverer of Israel. Come on. Her dad works cleaning up after the sacrifices in the Temple, and God is going to send the Messiah through her? Unbelievable! But then old Joseph turns out to be a stand-up guy. He mumbles something about a dream but says the contract's still good as far as he's concerned. And now her family doesn't know what to

think. Should they be angry, embarrassed, filled with wonder ... what? And who will this child favor? What will he be like? What will become of him? Will he truly be God's Deliverer or just another poor chump whose parents made bad choices? Will his birth be good news or bad news when all is said and done?

Both, of course. It's always both. We adopted our children, so I don't know how it feels to have life growing within in ways beyond my control and to look toward the day of deliverance with a mixture of dread and delight. But I know that new birth does not come without considerable painful labor. The mother cries out, and babies come crying into the world ... already grieving the loss of the safe warm place where they were comfortable, though limited in their growth. It isn't really a choice they make, either. Then everyone is happy, but it's just the beginning. New parents can't see too far past birth ... but the older and wiser among us might warn them there is heartbreak ahead to go with this joy, lots of hard work and long nights and worries over things you can't control and the abiding fear of the call that comes in the middle of the night. Birth and parenting and life itself are always a mixture of good news and bad news, because that's what it means to be human. And that is the essence of Advent.

Again we come to this season when ministers try to get people to postpone their Christmas celebrations long enough to consider what Christmas means. I feel like the church curmudgeon this time of year, like your mom telling you it isn't time yet, you can't open your presents until Christmas morning, and don't ask me again or I'll take them all back and tell Santa Claus not to come. "Why can't we sing Christmas carols, yet, pastor? The stores are all decorated, *It's a Wonderful Life* is on some channel every night, we'll all be out of town by the end of the month. Let's celebrate Christmas now!" But it's my solemn spiritual duty to say, "No. It isn't time yet. We're not ready. Christ is coming, and we haven't faced what it will be like."

Advent isn't just about getting ready for Christmas. It's about getting ready for Christ. It's about God breaking into the world the way it is ... to make it what it ought to be, and won't that be wonderful? Or will it? Do you really want God breaking into your life? Are you ready to welcome the righteousness and justice of God into your world? "Oh yes," you say, but do you realize what you're saying? I think of another Old Testament prophet, Amos. The people in his day loved to talk about "the day of the Lord." They were prosperous in those days. They had lots of time to lie back after the banquet and say, "Oh, won't it be wonderful when the day of the Lord comes? All these nations around us who have given us such trouble in days gone by will finally be wiped out. And all our headaches with incompetent workers and crooked politicians and unpredictable markets will vanish. The Lord will come, and won't it be good news!" But Amos said, "Wait a minute. Hold on there. God is not your personal valet. Have you forgotten how the poor suffer among you ... how you've wept before God at the altar over your financial worries and family problems and intellectual doubts, and then stepped over the homeless on the Temple steps to climb into your chariots, driving past hovels on your way home without even noticing they were there? Have you forgotten how much you have put into defense and security to keep them from getting what you have? Do you think God hasn't noticed your greed and trust in riches? The day of the Lord will be a disaster for you. You aren't ready to meet your Maker. You better clean up this mess before company comes." Amos had to tell them the bad news before he could speak of the good news about the day of the Lord.

Odd, isn't it, how each year the scriptures for the early part of December have such strange and bizarre language? In our passage from Luke this morning we heard, "*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. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken*" (Luke 21:25-26). These dramatic and frightening scenes seem so out of place as we hang mistletoe and holly and decorate the evergreen trees cut down so we can use them as symbols of unending life until their needles turn brown and we toss them in the trash. But we read these texts to get a good strong dose of reality. Advent is the news that God is coming to judge the world. God is coming to set things right. And while that is good news because our world is not right ... it is also bad news because we are not right ... we are a part of what is wrong with our world.

I can't buy a skirt or a radio or even a piece of fruit at the grocery store without the likelihood that someone has been exploited to get it to me ... or some financial connection with a company that pollutes the environment or makes money off human misery has been involved in helping me make that purchase. The system is evil, and we support it, because there is no other system not equally evil. Only God's intervention will make it right. When God comes, everything will change. Our way of life will change. We will have to change all our plans. We will have to let go of those grudges we have nursed as if we were any better than the people we judge. Some people like for the preacher to proclaim God's judgment. They like to hear what punishment the people on their list are going to get. But the message is ... you better go look in the mirror yourself. You have some things to straighten out before you're ready to meet Christ. Imagine God suddenly removing everything about your life that isn't right and good for others and of lasting value. What would you have left? Some things are too messed up for us to change. God alone can fix them. But we better change what we can, starting with ourselves.

On the other hand, imagine a world where suffering and death are over ... where no child cries with pains of hunger and no youth gets shut out because of the color of his skin ... where everybody is at peace with one another ... and no one need fear violence. Imagine a time when the weapons of war will be museum relics and all our wealth is invested in helping every baby grow up into a strong, healthy, productive adult. Think of the day when there will be no drug addiction, no homeless youth, no parents at odds with their children, no prisons and no hospitals ... where everybody will behave as nicely as they do at church all the time, with a constant awareness that the God of love is with them. Won't that be wonderful?

The message of Advent is that it won't always be this way ... and if you are suffering and struggling and fighting against all odds, that's good news. It won't always be this way. But if all your preoccupation is with how good you've got it and how you can hold on to it and who cares about the rest of the world, the message is bad news and a warning ... it won't always be this way!

When I lived in Chicago I was involved with a shelter for teens. I was startled by the turnover each week but I was told that these kids on the street don't usually stay more than two or three weeks in one place before moving on to the next town, because if they stay in one place too long they feel homeless, but if they move around they feel like adventurers. The truth is that we're all adventurers. We're all pilgrims just passing through this world. Don't get too comfortable here.

You aren't home yet. You're headed to a better place, and your job is to help your fellow travelers get there with you, the way Jesus did. But I don't know, is that good news or bad news to you? There are some things I like about this world that make it feel like home. I will be hard pressed to give them up. Other things about this world I would be glad to do without. But I really don't have a choice.

Because the advent of God is inevitable. One way or another, God will come to us ... or we will go to God ... one by one by one. And the advent of God is inevitably both good news and bad news for us, but what decides which predominates? Fred Craddock says that when he was a child out playing with his friends his mother would suddenly call him for dinner. And sometimes he would say, "Oh boy! That's my Mom! Supper's ready!" But other times he would say, "Uh oh. That's my mother!" And what was the difference? What was the difference? The difference wasn't in his mother. The difference was in him.

Do you see the woman great with child? Her baby carries our hope for the future. But what will he bring? What will it be like? We know he is coming. But will we be ready or not? Maybe we better pray.

O Christ, coming to deliver us, we know the world isn't right. We know we aren't right, but we feel so helpless to change sometimes. We hardly know where to start. So let us begin with hope. Let us begin by letting go of whatever hurts one another and holds us back from you. Thank you for your promise of a day to come when you will set everything and everybody straight. Thank you for the promise of a home where we can finally rest. Help us to build our lives now in a way that we will be glad to see you and ready to welcome you on the day of your coming. And make it soon, Lord. Oh please, make it soon. Amen.