

JEREMIAH 33:14-16  
PSALM 25:1-10  
I THESSALONIANS 3:9-13  
LUKE 21:25-36

First Sunday of Advent  
November 28, 2021; Year C

### *Surely Not!*

**“It’s the most wonderful time of the year!” “Sleigh bells here, are you listening?” “I’ll be home for Christmas!” “Santa Claus is coming to town!” “Ho, ho, ho!” “It’s a wonderful life!” “Walking in a winter wonder land,” whatever that is! “Let it snow! Let it snow! Let it snow!” Enough already! Make it stop! Make it stop! Make it stop! Ah, let’s all “don we now our gay apparel” for good measure! Yes, these are the warm and fuzzy, the cozy images that stir within us this time of year as we conjure up from our sleepy subconscious with joy or sadness or something in between and attempt to put ourselves into a holiday mood, full of the Yuletide spirit. And every year, as faithful church attending Christians, we dutifully come to worship, church attendance a high priority during these four sacredly special Sundays of Advent, all anticipating the Nativity of Our Lord, that advent of the Christ child. We gather in sacred space each week and brace ourselves for the onslaught, enduring stark biblical lections, the interpretations of which have become toxic, are guilt inducing, fear producing, subjecting us to the shock and awe of the worst of judgmental warnings, full of winnowing forks and unquenchable fire, all of it off-putting in every way as we are subjected to some of the worst apocalyptic nightmare scenarios imaginable, unspeakable language thrust into print, all threatening the tranquility of our hopes and dreams of every year of peace on earth and good will to all. These words of warning, of ultimate gloom and doom, we will now dutifully read each Sunday until the beginning of Christmas tide, those hallowed twelve days that begin at midnight, December twenty-fifth,**

asking the obvious question, “where in the name of Jesus is the hope, peace, joy, and love in any of this scriptural hyper-negativity.

These ominous promises, brought to you by the earliest “churches,” shadowy images disguised as threats or warnings, are full of the worst imaginable imagery, frightening assurances that have served to feed an entire cottage industry among those who embrace a conservative evangelical “rapture” culture, “rapture” being a made up word, the equivalent of the most irrational theological psychobabble, all designed to rescue us out of the bane of our existence, whatever misery might seek to ensnare and destroy us in what is presumed a pothole filled life and whisk us off to the wondrous bliss of heaven to spend eternity with a God of supposed grace who is oft portrayed in scripture as anything but! It is as if these ancient writers had a death wish, were obsessed on, even gleeful about, a cataclysmic ending, with the heroic warrior God defeating the abominable foe in the figure of Satan “himself.” It always bothers me that the devil is described as male, but come to think of it, in fairness, that is the way God has traditionally been portrayed! But I digress; I often do! The personalities of these writers evidently, surely, akin to a combination of two infamously fictional purveyors of doom and gloom in the Grinch and Ebenezer Scrooge, and of course, the biblical version in the person and prophet of John T. Baptist, ironically portrayed as a very real heroic figure in our Advent journey! He comes across like a bad Santa Claus, full of switches as he separates the naughty from the nice, the wheat from the burnable chaff. Yet we know from the history of these trailblazing first Christians that these dark days were indeed their lot in life, their reality, their daily grind of an existence! They were living it each day! No wonder their texts reflected the horrors of their day! These faithful flocks were trying desperately in the midst of pitch-black darkness to look to the brightest of light, to find ways to live into hope in the midst of abject hopelessness, while sufferingly scratching out their feeble existence. These narratives to

which we are now gratefully privy, all carefully selected by those magical, mystical lectionary editors, chosen for our Sunday perusal every three years in this calendric cycle, seem so much like a counter narrative, very counter intuitive and counterproductive, except when and where they painfully, strikingly, connect! Just ask the citizens of Waukesha, Wisconsin a week into their collective trauma. These haunting words of biblical proportions seem out of touch, tone deaf, irrelevant to our contemporary, postmodern sensibilities. And yet, here they are in black and white. Yes, these stark adjectives frame our worship as we pretend at best that somehow these words can be recast, transformed or reinterpreted as encouraging, enabling, emboldening, empowering descriptions, all newly and progressively designed to steel and steady our faith, undergirding our belief, strengthening our quest for spirituality, developing our deepest devotion and fueling our devotional discourse, as we seek to relate to a transcendent God of awe and wonder, absolute mystery revealed in absolute love and grace and mercy and, of course, peace. **The writer of the prophet Jeremiah says, “the days are surely coming,” and then we read from the Christian scriptures what those writers interpreted those halcyon days to be! These moments constitute anything but Camelot, days of wine and roses, proverbial salad days! NO! “The days are surely coming. . . .” Oh, surely, if my name is not Shirley, surely not! Great movie line, by the way . . . “Don’t call me. . . .” You get it! Shout out to the late Leslie Nielson of Airplane cinematography fame!**

Once again, before we dive too far into our sermonic pursuits, our homiletical journey this morning, a little background provides the context necessary to understand the biblical narrative, especially for our purposes as we seek to get into the mind of the epistle and Gospel writers whose compositions became the Christian scriptures, passing muster thanks to a vote carried out in secret by a bunch of power-hungry, power-wielding men, and men only, a patriarchy who formed the canon that came to be known as the Bible, yes, dictated by an all-

male clergy club, complete with an assumedly glass ceiling that would last for centuries. Yes, it was as much politics as it was textual sensitivity. Objectively not so much! But I digress; I often do! Once again, and you will hear me say these things ad nauseum when we refer to the Christian scriptures, what we have traditionally called the New Testament, this fact alone is a necessary caveat. The fact of the matter is the always necessary reminder of note to point out that these musings of the early, first century church, better said “churches” since there were numerous Christian communities sprouting in various locations, even at the earliest outset, the first developmental stages of a rapid evolution, reflected the specific context, the cultural milieu affecting the locus of a particular people in that particular time and place. When we read the interpretations of the living history unique to their predicaments, their recollections, we must remember that their oft-jaded views were and remain situational, circumstantial specific to the environment of their societal setting. Then, and only then, can we begin to understand their peculiar dynamics, feel their pain, relate to them in any way whatsoever. Again, most of the words attributed to Jesus were placed in his mouth by the early Church in its various expressions. Jesus shunned attention. Can you really picture Jesus spouting off about himself, the welcoming and inclusive, always hospitable native of Nazareth suddenly filled with vitriol, declaring distress and destruction of nations and their hapless inhabitants? These horrific musings are inconsistent with his loving message, illogical in every way! Anytime you read in the Gospels places where Jesus makes himself the center of attention, you can be guaranteed he did not think it or say it! It is not him! Jesus never had as much as one punishing, vengeful, retributive bone in his body! There, I feel better! As always, when reading the Bible, the first question that must be asked is “what did it mean by the writer who wrote, and equally important, what did it mean to the original reader?” Then, and only then, can we dare offer an opinion about what a given passage means to us now. That is always a secondary concern, a lesser priority, inconsequential and irrelevant to

everyone except the one who finds meaning in their unique eisegetical understanding and interpretation of a given text. Many a foul, offensive, and outright wrong assumption, usually used to inflict abuse on an individual or group, steeped in and reinforcing preconceived prejudicial stereotypes and biases, could be avoided if this simple step was taken in our reading of these ancient texts that became holy writ.

**The Israelites had endured a long history of much suffering at the hands of numerous adversaries, from their Egyptian owners to those pesky Canaanite tormenters annoyingly inconveniencing them on their wilderness and exile journey in pursuit of their assumed Promised Land, to their Babylonian captors to the worst, their Assyrian adversaries. Hence the mythical story of Jonah and his hatred of Ninevites, Assyrians all, in the book that bears his name, a book designed to confront prejudice, racism, and nationalism. It was a lot to overcome as the former Hebrew slaves carved out their niche by manifestly conquering the land of Canaan that became their land of promise, their permanent home. The earliest Christians were dealt a rough hand, defining their own share of misery, striving to remain a sect within Judaism, a viable part thereof, struggling to find their niche as they were unceremoniously separated, quietly or violently removed from the Temple and the synagogues by force, a very necessary cleansing to preserve religious and ritual purity. We call their dismissal “disfellowshipping” in today’s parlance! More politically correct, perhaps? Jesus’ followers to a large degree had already theologically distanced themselves from the faith tradition of their Jewish forebears, no doubt socially as well. Just imagine that awkward dinnertime conversation! Kind of like conversations between Democrats and Republicans at our holiday feasts! Even so, Jesus’ newly found faithful remained true to their cause in this new and rapidly evolving religious expression, whether they were fully aware of the implications or not. And not only that, but these Christian types were causing fear and anxiety, raising unwanted**

suspicion by an insecure and paranoid Rome desiring to keep them in check. Jesus' loyal followers quickly became scapegoats, blamed for all the societal challenges confronting a land that had long been dominated by Roman occupation. While their Jewish siblings were given a pass, legal to practice their faith within reason, these early "followers of the way" as Christians were first labeled, were illegal, considered a threat to empire, hardwired at the death of their presumed insurrection leader, Jesus, who died a common criminal at the hands of Rome because he was accused of sedition, a perceived peasant revolt that would overthrow the fragile puppet government led by a host of incompetent, insecure fools. Being a Christian was literally no place to be!

Congregants worshipped in homes, following Jewish liturgical traditions and patterns, while now sharing the Eucharist, the Supper, followed by an Agape Meal, a foreshadowing of the realm of God described in Luke's parable of the Great Banquet Feast. Every knock on the door was met with suspicion, a knot in the stomach, with fear and trembling, anxiety of the highest order, but with much courage and the greatest resolve. Brothers and sisters, colleagues in the faith, were arrested, tried, and executed in the cruelest of ways, terrorized and tortured beyond the breaking point even when they refused to bend or break, much less recant, persecuted beyond degree, death a gift, martyrdom a welcome relief, a soothing salve for the soul. Into the vortex of this great abysmal abyss, the early Christian writers assessed the seemingly hopeless situation swirling about them and creatively and metaphorically described what they came to believe was the only way out, fancifully imagining the prospects of a second coming of Jesus, theologically termed the Parousia, perversely articulated as the "rapture", created and then hardwired, institutionalized as one of the worst ecclesial inventions among a plethora of rancid and ridiculous features of laughable American nineteenth century evangelical revivalist theologies. The writers were

wrong then as lockstep, Kool Aid sipping, interpretive lemmings. The Church has, by and large, been wrong ever since! We must now find new ways of understanding these narratives other than the idea that Jesus is coming back on a white horse to save souls and skewer sinners, full of judgment and fire and brimstone, along with that damning winnowing fork, all commiserate with, becoming standard fare for conservative, sectarian, Christian living. It is imperative! Do we really think that any of these horrific images reflect the person of Jesus? Do we imagine the Jesus we know metaphorically holding a sheep in one hand and a sword in the other, grace and guilt balanced in equal measure? It is up to us to reevaluate, to reimagine, to reinterpret! We have no choice! The second coming is a misnomer. It was a blatant misread of the very real misery confronting first generation Christians back in the day and continues to be a blatant misread, misinterpretation of these ancient texts that were originally designed to be a commentary on present circumstances and not a prognostication, a prediction, a prophecy of eventuality and/or inevitably. Oh my!

What I wish the biblical writer in Luke had been able to say, in a way very much like the prophet Jeremiah when he wrote his encouraging tome, would have been simply stated or wished, the hope in the continuing promise that a better day is coming, somewhere on the horizon, that a new day is always dawning, somehow in the offing, assuaging or defeating any of our present human dilemmas or disasters. This is the only way I can demythologize and remythologize, interpret or reinterpret, these damning promises of eternal gloom and doom. This is the only way I can reimagine and re-image, the only way I can revision, creatively visualize, the harsh mythology inherently coloring the tenor of these one-way-ticket-to-paradise-by-way-of-earthly-destruction narratives. Frankly and sadly, we do not need divine intervention to destroy the planet, to bring an end to our world because we seem to have the capacity, apparently doing quite a good

enough job of bringing about our own demise, our own self-induced destruction as it is. Who needs God to do that for us? Who needs God's help when we are incredibly capable on our own! You all know the litanies well by now, a global pandemic, societal unrest leading to civil conflagrations and ultimately war, and a worldwide pollution machine wreaking havoc with the climate and the ecological environment it incubates. And we already conveniently have in our possession and at our disposal, "disposal being the operative term here, "the bomb," far more sinister than any Godly mythological prospectus. And on a more natural note, it came out just this week that NASA launched a spacecraft into orbit on Tuesday night, November 23<sup>rd</sup>, the likes of which is designed, so they claim, to smash into an oncoming asteroid in order to knock the offending and speeding space rock off course in case it might be a threat to planet earth! Very real! Who needs grandiose mythology of biblical proportions? Who needs Jesus on a white horse when a space rock could sadly do the trick? Sadly, these are the refrains we can now ingloriously recite from memory, whether we are alone or together. In my mind, it was no different for our biblical forebears who believed that their own apocalypse, their own version of Armageddon was right around the corner, so close they could taste it and feel it. They saw the prospects every day. Yes, with all that plagues our predicaments today we can certainly empathize, sympathize with our biblical forebears, our spiritual ancestors, in ways that prior to the twenty-first century we might could have never done, though looking through the rearview mirror down through the centuries shows that we have come awfully, mighty close. Like them, we are simply looking for a way out of the destructive dead-end scenarios that seem to be the ties that literally binds us humans over the course of time.

**And so, with all that being said, we look for words of hope today, promises of better days, signs that indicate that indeed a new day is dawning, indicators of God's precious presence and Providence. Be of good cheer this festive time of year, God is not sending Jesus back to**



**inflict judgmental Harry Carry on the world, on you and me. That is biblical nonsense, yes, theological drivel, demanding that a sobering word be voiced amidst a cacophony of crazy, a rational word about these biblical mysteries desperately needed to be heard and embraced by those whose faith is based in fear, wallowing in all that apocalyptic verbiage, distressing technicolor vocabulary, designed to keep people in check, prohibit them from straying or wandering off the primrose path of perfect piety. Yes, then and now it contains a nonsensical vernacular, crazy conversation, all its own! Please, give that up if that is the force fueling your spiritual wagon, driving your devotional response to the Holy. The writer of Luke tells us to be on guard that our hearts do not become weighed down with the worries of this life.** This creative composer tells us to avoid dissipation and drunkenness. Wow, there is an image. For none of us would want to be given over, a victim of the wiles of, the dangerous temptation of dissipation, predisposed to a descent into drunkenness, sexual mischief, squandering of resources like money or energy, no doubt a metaphor for all the good gifts we enjoy in this life. We may not know dissipation, but we all know drunkenness, ours or someone else's. Some of us have been there before! Be careful out there this holiday season! Know when to say when, when too much is too much! These are the kinds of behaviors humans unfortunately engage when life seems out of sorts, when the rhythm of our emotional, mental, physical, or even spiritual equilibrium is out of whack, out of balance, and the world just does not seem right to us, the way we believe it should be, yes, when we are depressed. Yes, there is a whole lot of that going around during these challenging days, individually and collectively, exacerbated for many during the holiday season. Perhaps the biblical writer in immensely intuitive wisdom was trying to tell the reader then and would no doubt convey the same message to us today that we find our center, whatever it is that helps us focus and order our lives, whatever it takes to embrace the grace and mercy, along with the Advent themes of the hope, peace, joy, and love that all human beings so desperately need to

find to achieve a healthy disposition, peaceable being such a desperately needed commodity.

**The good news is that no matter the world's ills or good tidings of greatest joy, the best and worst of all worlds, God, holy presence, is somehow still in the midst, the still, the mystery of the still small voice of the still speaking God, incarnational stuff, meaning that we are not alone. The resiliency of our biblical forebears is the reminder that in their endurance and perseverance that we too will survive our predicaments, our circumstances and situations, all the least common denominators of our own paths of least resistance. We too will overcome, no obstacle too great to destroy us or our hopefully optimistic spirits. In many ways, we are called to do exactly what our forebears in the faith, our spiritual ancestors, were able to do, from the times of the Israelite's formation as a people and a nation, to the believers in Christ Jesus who sprouted and grew out of that spiritual tree, we are to lean on one another, trust in one another, build community, beloved faith community, to be the church family for each other and for any who are seeking similar respite for their weary souls. Herein we find our commonality, truly the tie that binds us to those of old and to all of us now together, human beings, often frail and fragile, vulnerably compromised because of God knows what, pilgrims, seekers, then who were looking for the same solace as we, the good life, freedom of expression, the gift of being who you are, created just as you are. In that regard, we are no different from those pilgrims who went before us, blazing a trail, making straight the pathways of God's good grace. And it will be no different for those who come after us, following in our footsteps, trusting that we will leave even a clearer path than the one we inherited, hoping that they too find a well-worn path that is worthy of their willingness to follow in our humble steps. We walk by faith and not by sight. We believe, whatever belief is. We have faith, whatever faith is. We trust the still speaking Spirit and hopefully, there is that Advent image again,**

**trusting each other, learning day by day what trust is and how to trust in these very mistrusting days. We pray for grace for the journey as we negotiate our life setting, including all the unique nuance that just so happens to be ours in these sacred moments in our lifetime. And so, the bottom line regarding these very off-putting Advent texts, is not only will these things never come to pass, troubling us in any and every way, but soon these Advent stories too will thankfully be behind us, and we will bask in the glow of the good tidings of great joy that is Christmas, the Nativity of Our Lord, the glorious birth of the Christ child, creating it's on interesting set of biblical dynamics, both challenging and fulfilling. Therein is our hope today! Stay tuned!**

**In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and is not returning to earth with a bag of switches and a naughty or nice list with your name on either one of them. Thanks be to God! Amen and amen!**