

First Sunday of Advent; Hope
JEREMIAH 33:14-16
PSALM 25:1-10
I THESSALONIANS 3:9-13
LUKE 21:25-36

Half Glass . . .!

Writing for the lections for the First Sunday of Advent, Presbyterian preacher Joanna M. Adams began her comments by telling a personal story, noting that “One Thanksgiving my husband and I went to Alabama to visit family. When the time came for us to drive back home, I said, ‘It’s pitch-black dark. I wish we were not leaving so late.’ When my husband replied, ‘It’s 5:00 in the afternoon,’ I said glumly, ‘It feels like the middle of the night.’” Oh, how we in the Northwoods can relate! Adams then went on to say, “How odd that the most hopeful season of the Christian calendar begins in the middle of darkness! When we light the first candle on the Advent wreath, it will not be a second too soon. This Advent I feel an urgent need for the light that comes from God, and I do not think I am the only one. I try not to be a crepehanger, but Lord have mercy . . . The voices of division in our land are so loud. The clouds of anxiety about the future are hovering so low and close that you can barely see your hand in front of your face.” Sound familiar? I intentionally failed to mention that a major part of the anxiety that was driving Adams’ comments, inspiring her timely concerns, was directed toward the war in Iraq, her prophetic words written all the way back, once upon a time, in 2006, a time that seems so long ago, lightyears behind us in our rearview mirrors. The more things change, the more they remain the same, history repeating itself over and over and over again, not as if for the first time. Adams then adds, “Here is another odd thing: on the first Sunday of Advent, the beginning of a new year for the Christian church, the lectionary brings us the apocalypse.” Ironically, I would

add, Adams observes, “We begin our preparations for the coming of the Christ child with a heart-stopping passage that predicts the end of the world. . .” Yes, all the lections chosen for this high and holy festival day speak of and to the hope of the coming of God, and in the case of the Christian scriptures, the return, or second coming, of Jesus as Christus Victor, the victorious Christ, the humble rabbi once depicted in life as a man of peace but now sadistically portrayed as a warrior savior who will separate the wheat from the chaff, the sheep from the goats. The glass is either half full or the glass is half empty and you get to choose, as always it is a matter of perspective.

These varied texts we are exploring today are found throughout the Bible, presenting a strange mixing of metaphorical imagery, a bizarre blending of human thinking and emotion, piecing together a weirdly concocted and connected collection of positive and negative images. These optimistically hopeful images anticipating the coming of the Messiah in the Hebrew Bible are juxtaposed in the Christian scriptures describing the belief in a return of Jesus, the consequences of this final event offering as many redemptive qualities as it does pushing a punishing agenda reaping cataclysmic results spawning a contemporary cottage industry characterized by a very successfully marketable agenda pandering in fearmongering. In each testament somebody must pay, some unfortunate schlep must pay the piper, some adversary punished, the enemies of God, all of them real and not imagined, brought to heel, brought to destruction. As the Pauline writer of Philippians says, or warns, “That at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow and proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord!” (Philippians 2:10-11). No exceptions! These exclusive words would not be a part of an advertising campaign promoting interfaith relations! The combination of all this hyperbolic imagery makes for a toxic compound, the result leaning toward an inevitable diabolical doom and gloom, a dismal outlook fostering a doomsday scenario with the end of the world as we know it as the final and ultimate outcome. Ironically, this mythological

apocalyptic drama of biblical proportions is understood by many to be a delightfully wonderful solution to the many and multifaceted ills that trouble humanity, a perverse prognostication based on a presumably literal interpretation of scripture. Proponents get starry-eyed, downright giddy, even weepy, talking about this stuff, begging for this mythic return! It is as if these nightmarish hermeneutical scenarios were created in a diabolically hatched exegetical laboratory! Yes, there are a whole host of folks today who simply love to wallow in all kinds of “rapture” conspiracies, nonsense theories adopting a dispensational premillennialism first espoused by John Nelson Darby in 1833.

“Rapture” is a hijacked word made popular in nineteenth century evangelicalism or revivalism, propogandists predicting the second coming of Jesus, theologically called the *Parousia*, explaining why the word “rapture” was coined to take its place. No wonder! I have never understood those who long for the end of the world, who wish for, pray for, hope for, cataclysmic destruction, a global crash and burn, who have been captivated by these myths, literalizing ancient mythological tales from the Bible, complete with apocryphal disasters that bring their deviant fantasies about a showdown of Armageddon proportions to life. To believe in such fallacies demands a belief in a God that, not who, that is anything but graciously loving, merciful and peaceful, but is rather the opposite, a malevolent monster, a vengefully vindictive deity who revels in retribution and judgment, i.e., retributive justice, punishing the wicked rather than redeeming those who have unfortunately lost their way along their way. No, thank you!

Well, I am here to tell you this morning that I know that you do not want to ponder such nonsensical musings, listening to dire warnings of divinely wrought global mass destruction, hearing about what the Hebrew Bible ominously describes in the book of Daniel, quoted again in the Gospel of Matthew (24:15-31), as the “desolating sacrilege,” (abomination of desolation), any more than I want to preach them. It sounds as bad as it would be! The shear insanity of such hopeless

wishful thinking! So, with all that introduction being offered as prologue, our goal is to make some proverbial lemonade out of a huge bowl full of textual lemons. In the interest of full disclosure, one of the annual rites of preaching and preachers is to begin the Advent season by lamenting, insert your favorite expletive adjective here, many of us preacher types complaining, constantly griping about the texts that frame what should be a most festive, a happy and joyful, time of year. More “whine” please! After all, today is just a warmup! Soon, we will be reliving once more the exciting adventures, the happily frolicking escapades of that carefree, lighthearted, most serendipitous gadfly, reading about that iconic prophetic figure named John the Baptist, the biblical equivalent of a combination of the Grinch and Ebenezer Scrooge all wrapped into one. Incarnated in the Gospel narratives, John was a latter-day throwback prophet, yes, “throwback” being the operative word here because we surely would like to throw him back. Complete with all John’s judgmental imagination glaringly on display, we are brutally subjected every Advent to all the bluster spewing forth from his threatening, frightening, winnowing fork talk, fork you, fueled by fiery infernos burning the chaff, including the likes of any and everyone who has been naughty and not nice. **John T. Baptist ain’t no Santa Claus, but as we read about him and read his words, his smoking chimney stoking the fires heating up the brimstones of hell are alive and kicking!**

At the same time, so much of the Bible, Hebrew Bible and Christian scriptures, was written during times of distress and upheaval, periods of war engaged by fractious tribes and clans, battle-royales overflowing with every manner of persecution imaginable, the spoils of victory including slavery to the losers, exacerbated by the unimaginable kinds of terror and torture always associated with warring madness. No wonder our texts reflect the dis-ease and violence that unfortunately has rocked this planet from the first time one cave man dared to take away another cave man’s food. And so,

the challenge, the question, before us is how do we reinterpret these texts while not dismissing them, ignoring their content, pretending that they say something other than what they say, imagining that they never said what they say and thus do not now? How do we stay true to the texts and stay true to our better selves with our best sensibilities affirming the graciously loving and hospitably welcoming and inclusive presence of God in the world. Indeed, our theology is supported by the very biblical idea, undergirded by the radical notion that God is still speaking, continuing to redeem the world and its inhabitants, all creation embraced by the salvation of God. After all, we look for, we celebrate, the good, the very good, inherent in all creation. So, how do we continue to have faith, to prosper a belief in God as One who continues to be “the ‘One’ behind the curtain,” in the mystery of time pulling the strings, mysteriously moving and shaking, and making sure that all is well in the universe? Of course, we all desperately wish we could see in our time and on our terms, hints, glimpses, of divine presence, physical manifestations or sightings, what theologians call theophanies, the kinds of supposed sensory awareness that appears throughout the Hebrew Bible. Of course, despite this somewhat naïve desire, we know fully that God, the Holy imperfectly but imaginatively described in a variety of beautiful ways, including Ground of All Being, Holy Other, Great Spirit of the Universe is always shrouded in the shadows of mysterious transcendence that can only be described as, perceived as, an illusively captivating holy presence. What appear to be non-answers may not, probably will not, satisfy our longings, but we know that they are enough because they have to be enough, must be, enough! Yes, enough is enough, in a good way!

What I do know about these ancient texts, or at least what I think I know, is that the thing, the common thread, that connects us with the earliest writers and readers of these precious words we faithfully dare to call holy writ, is that our forebears in the faith chafed, lamented the perceived absence of God, while at the same time longing for, yes,

sensing, the very real presence of God, irony of ironies, perhaps the ultimate oxymoron, believing in, trusting in, putting faith in, the hope for the coming of the Holy One into the world they inhabited, the sacred amazingly manifested in their lives. Perhaps this is the biggest tie that binds us together, an inextricable bond, the point at which, the place at which, we are interconnected, an intersection that is irreversible, an enmeshment that makes time disappear, no separation from then until right now in these very sacred moments! And who could blame our ancestors for wanting a divine intervention that would put an immediate end to their suffering, that would put them out of their misery? Think of all the horrific atrocities perpetrated, yes, perpetuated, by human beings on other human beings down through the centuries, a sordid history sadly of as much misery as rejoicing, as much evil as good, as much persecution, terror and torture, as joy, rejoicing and celebration. And yet, we human beings somehow manage to not just manage, to not only cope, to not merely painstakingly deal with the misfortunes befalling this life and living, but we overcome. We not only just survive but we thrive, triumphing over all the laborious toiling that is part and parcel, commensurate with being human, every ill that threatens to not only diminish our humanity but seeks to destroy it. Surely, somehow, at some level, God must surely be in the midst, in our midst. God has to be a part of the equation, yes, mysterious presence that stirs the hope that wells up within us, satisfying the longing of our spirits, feeding the ravenous spiritual hunger within us, quenching the thirsts of our parched souls. The rearview mirrors of our lives truly give us the proof of the pudding, the clearest reflection of divine presence, a perspective of crystal clarity showing us when and where, perhaps how, God has been present, carrying some of the load, undergirding us at our most fragile, our most desperate, our most grievous moments.

Today and throughout this holy season of Advent, as with every day in which we are graced, the word before us is hope, the promise of God that today we are surrounded by grace, that there will be a tomorrow, a tomorrow filled with peace, joy, and love, that there is always a hopeful horizon ushering in the brightest of a new day dawning. Yes, sometimes it is hard to hold out hope, to trust, to put our faith in a God who seems as much, if not more, absent than present, a God who stirs as much doubt as faith, a God in whom we place our belief against waves of disbelief, shadows of unbelief. And yet, something deep within our spirits, welling up from the depth of our souls, gives us an overwhelming assurance, a calm that overcomes all the tide rolling in opposition, pulling against our rational selves, yes, a still, small, voice calling to us, urging us, offering a sense, a feeling, giving us the strangest confidence that we are not alone in this big universe and on this very small spaceship of a planet, all will be well, that all is well, and that God is present and that we can take solace in whatever level of security that hope allows. In these mysteries we take solace, trusting in a faithful hope that sets the stage as we enter another season of Advent, embarking on another journey toward the manger and beyond, praying, yes, hoping, the fulfilment of the coming of God in Christ into the world in every way conceivably imaginable, conception being the operative word in this sacred setting this time of year.

**In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains, and gives us hope, hope for brighter days ahead, a future that has no end!
Amen and amen!**

