

Advent C1
 November 29, 2015
 “Anhele, Come Lord Jesus!”
 Central Presbyterian Church, Montclair
 David Noble

Luke 21:25-36

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. ²⁶People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. ²⁸Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

²⁹Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; ³⁰as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. ³¹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³²Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. ³³Heaven 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 catch you unexpectedly, ³⁵like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶Be 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.”

1.2.

Thanksgiving was great. I looked forward to seeing all our kids-- and it was wonderful. We enjoyed turkey, and stuffing, and green bean casserole, and pies, and a good time around the table talking about family and friends and jobs. And when everyone left they were loaded down with leftovers to extend the celebration back home in Queens and Brooklyn.

Now with Advent and Christmas on the way we turn to decorating and preparing our home for the open house next Sunday. I will set up the little crèche scene that my mother made for me years ago- she knitted Joseph and Mary and the angels and shepherds, and baby Jesus in his knitted manger. You probably have some sentimental favorites that you will be unpacking and setting up as well.

Normally, all this is accompanied by a warm and fuzzy feeling. But this year the Thanksgiving holiday and the preparation for Christmas has had a sort of cloud hanging over it. We tried our best these past few days but giving thanks was tinged with sorrow, and joy was being pruned by suffering.

I remember most years that Thanksgiving and the first Sunday of Advent were glad and optimistic days and I would have read the scripture passages from Jeremiah and Luke that we’ve just heard and said something about how strange they are—how serious and grim they sound for

this time of year. Jeremiah says justice will come someday. Safety will come someday. Justice and safety used to seem so ordinary and taken for granted. But not so much now.

Jesus gets into the act too--talking about distress and chaos on earth among nations, and fear and foreboding in human hearts. He warns us to be on guard and alert. He's going to return in power and glory, he says. But I suspect most people associate Advent with getting ourselves ready for baby Jesus to come snuggled in his bands of cloth and lying in a manger.

Not so fast, Jeremiah and Luke say. And they give us these ominous words about Jesus coming again that ordinarily seem so out of place.

But this year scripture seems to be in sync with our times. The earth has been shaken- with explosions, the sea has roared-with cruise missiles, part of the earth has disappeared- into the hands of evil men.

Last Friday evening the president of France paid tribute in an emotional ceremony to all those lost two weeks ago in the Paris attacks. Military personnel patrol the streets of Paris now and have become more and more visible here in our own metropolitan area. The Ashenfelter Classic was run this past Thursday morning in Glen Ridge. It's a 5 mile race every Thanksgiving that attracts thousands of runners. This year there was a sniper on a rooftop overlooking the race. I don't know, maybe he's been there for past races, but this year his presence seemed to sum up the strange combination of life and death that is hanging over this season.

3. 4.

But it's not all serious talk. The prophet Jeremiah also assures us that God has a plan. God says "the day is surely coming."

Jeremiah wrote these words to his fellow Israelites as they were deported to Babylon, to a prison on the banks of the Euphrates, as the Babylonian army destroyed the Jerusalem temple back home. That temple was supposed to be God's home on earth from which God's power ruled over God's people and the whole world. But as the stones of the temple fell on top of one another, the faith of God's people was crumbling. What now, they asked?

But in the midst of what seems to be chaotic destruction of God's people, Jeremiah preaches a "day that is coming." We can stand up he says, we can stand up because God is not finished. Jeremiah is scorned for his hope, despised for his longing in the face of tragedy. Yet he preaches God's faithfulness and righteousness and the new day God is bringing.

God says the promise to establish a chosen people and send a savior into the world is as guaranteed as the sun coming up tomorrow morning. It would take the kind of power required to stop the sun from rising and setting every day, in order to thwart God's promises. There is no such power that threatens God's purposes.

Why do we rummage around in the prophets during Advent? Why do we read stories about destruction and hopelessness when we are trying to hang the wreaths and decorate the trees?

These aren't the words we've waited all year to hear again, the words about shepherds watching over their flocks by night, and choirs of angels singing, and wise men kneeling before the king of kings.

But for us as God's people, Advent has never led directly to the crèche. Advent is not a tidy and efficient path bathed in soft stanzas of "away in a manger" or "silent night, holy night." Advent is a time of waiting and preparing and pondering over "a day that is surely coming."

One of my favorite books is by a Lutheran pastor named Heidi Neumark who described her recent ten year ministry in the South Bronx. She says she loves Advent so much because of all the seasons of the church year it is a true reflection of how she feels most of the time.

"I might not feel sorry during Lent when the liturgical calendar begs repentance, and I might not feel victorious even though it is Easter morning, and I might not feel full of the Spirit though it is Pentecost and the liturgy spins out fiery gusts of ecstasy. But during Advent," she says, "I am always in sync with the season.

"Advent unfailingly embraces and comprehends my reality. And what is that? I think of the Spanish word *anhelo*, a-n-h-e-l-o, it means *longing*. Advent is when the church can no longer contain its unfulfilled desire and the cry of *anhelo* bursts forth: Maranatha! Come Lord Jesus! O Come, O come, Emmanuel!"

That's what Jeremiah was preaching: *anhelo*. He longed to see what God is yet to finish.

But Jesus proclaims *anhelo* in the most stunning way. He says, "when these things begin to take place (these difficult and frightening things), stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

So let's not allow threats of terrorism to keep us down. Let's stand up and raise our heads, our redemption has drawn near in Jesus.

Don't let fear prevent us from making a welcoming and safe home for refugees. Let's stand up and raise our heads, for our redemption has drawn near in Jesus.

Don't let fear stop us from insisting on human rights for everyone, of all races and ethnicities. Let's stand up and raise our heads, for our redemption has drawn near in Jesus.

Martin Luther is credited with saying, "If the world was going to end tomorrow, I would plant a tree today."

That's *anhelo*. Remembering that Jesus Christ is the Lord of History. We know the end of this story.

So during the last week of December we will be crying *anhelo* as we welcome the homeless to our church. Come Lord Jesus and bless our guests.

We will be proclaiming *anhelo* when we gather for cookies, cocoa, and carols in three weeks and go out to sing to homebound and lonely friends and neighbors. We long for God's presence with them.

We are shouting *anhelo* now as we send out interviewers to evaluate the work of nonprofits in our community with whom we may want to partner in the years ahead. We hunger to see God's new creation blossoming here in our community.

We long for what God is going to do. We long for God's justice and righteousness and peace; we long for God's savior so much that we stand up with courage and shape our lives today around it.

The day is surely coming!
Anhelo! Come Lord Jesus!