

1 Advent - 29 November 2009
Jeremiah 33:14-16; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36
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'The Day is Coming.' It could be the title to a book or a movie, it is such an important theme. Such stories tell of people enduring inequities and injustices that are too deeply rooted in history, too systemic to isolate, sins that are simply too powerful for people to overcome on their own strength. And what gives the people the strength to endure is the hope and the promise that a day is coming, when they will witness things set right again, or even set right for the first time ever.

I read a story, said to be true. One day Allison, a substitute teacher, gets a call. "One of our students is in the hospital," explains the district administrator. "He is expected to be there for quite some time, so we need someone to visit him on a regular basis. Allison says she's interested. "Good," says the administrator. "He's a fourth-grader; his name is Charlie Emmet, and his teacher at school tells us that his class has been studying nouns and adverbs." It isn't until Allison is outside the boy's room at the hospital that she learns that Charlie is a patient in the burn unit. No one has prepared the teacher to find that a boy who has been horribly burned and in great pain. She wonders if this is the day that she should visit. She wonders if, for this boy, the day when she should visit will ever come at all.

It may well be that the prophet Jeremiah is wondering much the same. Jeremiah lives in an era in which the people of God are surrounded by hostile empires at war with one another and so with the divided kingdom of God's people caught in the middle. Throughout most of his life, Jeremiah visits the people with guidance from God. And none of what God says is all that new. It resonates with everything that God has communicated generation after generation. This means that some of what Jeremiah says in his prophecies is encouraging, promising, some of it is challenging, and some of it is even directly contradictory to what seems in every other respect to be sound judgment.

So, as is true for any good prophet, Jeremiah is ignored or despised by the leaders of the people in his day. We hear this morning a bit of from Jeremiah's prophecies

foretelling the day when God will rescue the people, when God will restore them to safety from their enemies. And if this sounds like good news to the people, the leaders are less than enchanted. In order for them or anyone to welcome Jeremiah's prophecies as good news, they must first agree that things have in fact gone wrong. They must acknowledge that truly only God can bring in that day when everything is made right again.

The day is coming very soon for Jeremiah and the people, when Babylon will dethrone the people's king, and will kill or enslave the Temple priests who guide the people's superficial worship of God. And there's simply nothing that the people can do about any of it. And that's when Jeremiah's prophecies speak to them again. That's when they will long for the day, look for the signs, listen for the clues that tell them that the day is coming.

At the hospital, the teacher Allison knows she cannot simply turn around and walk out. Awkwardly, she greets Charlie and struggles to explain, "I'm your hospital teacher. I'm here to teach you about your nouns and adverbs." She works through their first session together, and leaves with the boy still in agony. She is wondering if any of this could ever be relevant to Charlie in his condition. She's wondering if Charlie will be able just to hold on just to get to even one more day.

In his ministry, Jesus finds himself speaking to people who are struggling to hold on for just one more day. And he speaks to them of their need and of their desire to know that they will be set free from their own captivity that all things will be made right again. Jesus wants them to know that 'the Day is coming.' 'There will be signs,' says Jesus. 'And people will be afraid of what is going on around them. There will be calamities. And people will be frightened about what is about to happen next.'

And rightly so, I think, one wonders: how are the people responding to all this? Already in his ministry, Jesus has told them that the people who are confident of their own righteousness are actually the most mistaken about their

standing before God. So, for those people who longing and needing to know that the Day is coming, are they more scared when they hear this, or more encouraged?

William Marston was an American psychologist in the early 20th century. He once conducted a survey in which he asked 3000 people, "What have you to live for?" Some were waiting for 'something to happen,' some were waiting for 'next year.' Some of the people responded that they were waiting for 'a better time.' Others responded that they were waiting for 'someone in particular to die;' and some were simply waiting for 'tomorrow.' Fully 94% of the people reported that they were "enduring the present while they were waiting for the future."

In Jesus' day, as in the days of Jeremiah, the people are doing likewise, they are living today on the hope that 'the Day is coming.' "Lift up your heads," says Jesus, 'Don't cower and hide, for your redemption is drawing near. These are signs,' says Jesus, 'that God's Kingdom is near.' Then Jesus says, 'This generation will experience all these signs taking place.' The problem with this is, if all these things that Jesus is describing actually do take place in the lifetime of the people hearing Jesus predict them, then, what does that mean for the rest of us? Has the Day that is coming already come? Did we miss it? And, if so, are we just simply out of luck, now?

But I think Jesus knows that a lot of people are enduring today in hopes of a better tomorrow. I think Jesus knows that a lot of people around us, a lot us ourselves, are counting on the coming of that Day.

At the hospital, the teacher Allison returns the next day to visit with Charlie, still suffering from terrible burns and still struggling in great pain. Allison returns that day, and the next day, and each day thereafter. She does her best each day to teach the boy his nouns and adverbs. After the first week of visits, Allison enters the unit as usual. This time a nurse meets her before she can go into Charlie's room. "Miss," says the nurse, "just what have you been doing to that boy?" "Oh... oh..." Allison stammers. "I was just here to teach," she explains. "I hope I didn't hurt him..." The nurse interrupts. "You don't understand," she says. "We've been very worried about Charlie. We've wondered if

the day would ever come when he would start getting better. But since you started visiting with him," the nurse goes on, "Charlie' whole attitude has changed. He's begun responding to treatment. He's fighting back; it seems he has decided to live."

A few weeks later, the teacher finally asks Charlie about what ever happened. And he is able to tell her. "It all came to me in flash one day," Charlie explains. "I knew I was hurt real bad; I figured there wasn't anything anybody could do, and I just wanted it to be over. Then I realized:" says Charlie, "they wouldn't send a teacher to work with me on nouns and adverbs if I was really dying. That was the day," he says, "when I knew I was going to make it."

Just about everyone in every generation, meets a time in his life or hers when so much is going wrong that it feels like judgment from on high, that God has just shown up and caught everybody by surprise. Jesus knows that no generation passes away before all these things first come to pass. And so Jesus wants people to know that no generation passes away before God brings in that Day that many of them are waiting for. They may fear it, but they want it even more. We may worry about it, but we hope for it even more.

In every generation Jesus wants people to know, you, me, our loved ones, family and friends, and the people around us, Jesus wants us all to know, that God does not give up on us; that none of us ever really waits alone; that when your problems or mine are too big to settle alone, God is giving to us strength in one another to meet them, strength in Christ Jesus to defeat them; that God is giving to us hope for the Day that is coming; that God is giving to us realization, revelation, perhaps in a flash, to tell us that the day that is coming is already here.

Now may Almighty God, by whose Anointed One is conquered sin and death, and life is made everlasting, grant that by this victory we may be made bold to do in our time the work of Christ our Savior, and faithful to hope always for the coming in of the Kingdom of God; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and for ever. Amen.