

Sermon – 1st Advent
Jeremiah 33:14-16 & Luke 21:25-36
December 2, 2018

“Stand Up and Cheer”

Pygmalion was the name of a king in an ancient Greek myth. He was also a sculptor. Apparently disinterested in the women of his native Cyprus, he sculpted an ivory statue representing his ideal woman, then fell in love with his own creation. In answer to a prayer he later offered to the goddess Aphrodite, the statue was brought to life. Pygmalion and the new love of his life Paphos married and lived happily ever after. *Pygmalion* is also the name of a play by George Bernard Shaw, later made into the musical, *My Fair Lady*, in which the snooty professor Henry Higgins remakes lower-class Eliza Doolittle into a cultured lady and then promptly falls in love with her.

These stories may be quite off-putting today, what with their implicit message that women need some refining to be acceptable – but they may help us with what I would call “our expectation gap” in this season of Advent. To all of us today, our surroundings look a lot like Christmas. Christmas is joy, it’s that “*all is calm, all is bright, round yon virgin mother and child...sleep in heavenly peace*” season. Advent however is devoted to that part of the biblical story that preceded Jesus’ birth, when the Jewish people waited expectantly for God to do something to improve their unhappy existence.

That something was to be a someone actually – a King, a Savior - the Jews used the term “Messiah.” It was in Israel a time of both lowered and heightened expectations. Lowered because Jewish life was lived under Roman governance - heightened because of prophets like Jeremiah who spoke eloquently and forcefully of a time when “*Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will live in safety.*” “*The days are coming*” were forceful and reassuring words for the Jews - a creed and a prayer.

All the more so because everyone knew Jeremiah lived in a time of national distress. Jerusalem’s citizens were being marched off into exile in Babylon. He’s known as “*the Iron Prophet*” because he forcefully called Israel to repent, to little or no avail – hence the Babylonians. But he spoke words of hope too - telling of a day when a “*righteous Branch*” would spring up from the line of King David -- who would restore order not in the usual way of kings, by force that is, but by teaching and living a righteous life. That day was off in the future, but those who listened waited with expectation for it to happen. Jeremiah hadn’t made this stuff up. “*The days are coming*” were God’s words, not his.

Christians, of course, believe Jesus is the fulfillment of that prophecy. Jesus is that righteous Branch. But he too told us that fulfillment of God’s kingdom is not here yet. That’s where the “*expectation gap*” between Advent and Christmas lies. It’s hard to figure Jesus out. Our ideal is the Jesus who in the gospel of John said “*peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you.*” Harder to fall for is the Jesus of Matthew 10 who said “*I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.*” The Jesus who comes at Christmas does not instantly bring calm, and the one who is coming again may not be either. In our reading from Luke, Jesus speaks in apocalyptic tones of signs, both cosmic and human, that will signal his return and the coming of the kingdom.

These signs sound distressing and terrifying, indeed they are for nearly everyone. But Jesus says that when they occur, those following him should “*stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.*” We hear that phrase “*stand up*” and think posture. What it really

means is *“be elated.”* Think Super Bowl a few years ago – Aaron hitting Jordy for another touchdown. You weren’t just “standing up”, you were jumping for joy!

In other words, *“the days that are coming”* might not be pleasant – indeed they sound like they will very much be worse than our present circumstances – however that can be imagined. But the followers of Jesus won’t like *“faint with fear”* – they will jump for joy. Odd, particularly for we who, as followers of Jesus, are told to *“weep with those who weep”* and *“bear one another’s burdens.”* Nothing in this passage however should be interpreted to mean, as some unfortunately suggest, that we’ll jump for joy at the sight of punishment inflicted by God on “sinners.”

We know better than that - because we count ourselves among those sinners. Advent then, is a time to rethink our Christ-based expectations, and not sculpt for ourselves the Savior of our ideal, one who, paraphrasing American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, *‘comes without judgement to a people without sin calling them into a kingdom without repentance through a Jesus without a cross.’* When Jesus comes, *‘all will be calm, and all will be bright’* to all who long for his appearing, but who long for that appearing because, as Paul says in II Timothy 4:6 they *“have fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith.”*

There is no basis in God’s word for saying that faithful religious practice will pay off in the end in prosperity, good health or any other blessing - in fact the opposite may very well be true. In Luke Jesus is quite clear – whatever distress may come to the world, it will, verse 35 says, *“come on all those who live on the face of the whole earth.”* Christians should expect nothing less. *“What did I do to deserve this?”* as though our faith were an investment upon which we can expect freedom from troubles has no place in our understanding of faith.

Oddly, it’s the Old Testament that brings the good, or if I may say “gooder” news today. *“The days are coming, declares the Lord...when you will be saved – you will live in safety.”* You can expect nothing less than grace from God who is your Savior. This is the Jesus whose birth is coming - who “on that day” and against all appearances to the contrary will make you leap for joy at his appearance. For a very good reason did the angel say to his father *“you shall name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”* He did. AMEN