

An Advent Homily

First Sunday of Advent – November 29, 2009

Luke 21:25-36

A homily preached by Rev. Dr. Ivan H.M. Peden Copyright: 2009, I. Peden

MUMC, Thomasville, NC

Today – the First Sunday of Advent – is also the first Sunday of a new Christian Year. We begin this season of Advent with a Gospel reading that tells us of the turmoil the people of God were living through at the time of Christ. The people of Israel were living under the rule of the Roman Empire and had been waiting for a promised King to emerge: for a Messiah, one anointed by God, to come and restore Israel to her former glory. But the people had been waiting a very long time. They had become distracted. In Luke 21:34 we read that they were “weighed down by the anxieties of this life.” They were living in a time of strife, uncertainty, and confusion.

The season of Advent marks a time of waiting and watching for the arrival of the Messiah. Last week we celebrated Christ as King. Like the Jewish people of Jesus’ day, we think we know what the Messiah should look like. Christians believe that the Messiah has come in the Person of Jesus of Nazareth who lived, and died, and rose again, and that he will return, as we recite in The Apostles’ Creed, “to judge the living and the dead.”

We, too, are living in a time of distraction and strife. Luke describes a time in which heaven and earth will pass away – a time of cosmic cataclysmic destruction. Certainly today in some parts of our world it must seem as if this prophecy is coming to pass. There are wars being fought all over the planet that have caused death, displacement, deprivation, and the destruction of peace for the lives of countless people.

We, Americans, pay close attention to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan due to the presence of our country’s armed forces in those countries. The fate of our military personnel and our country’s future involvement weigh heavily on our minds. When will this all end? When will our soldiers come home? At the end of some TV programs there is a nightly remembrance of American men and women, many of them painfully young, who have died serving our country. As we sit on our sofas taking this all in, we, too may get “weighed

down by the anxieties of life,” and begin to feel a sense of hopelessness and helplessness.

Meanwhile, having celebrated Thanksgiving this week, we are entering what some of us believe in the words of the Christmas song, is “the most wonderful time of the year!” If the truth be told, for many of us it isn’t so wonderful. This season between Thanksgiving and Christmas is for many people a time of despair as we grieve the absence of our loved ones who have died, or those who are estranged from us. It is also a time of remembering great expectations of holidays past that were not fulfilled, and facing new expectations of present holidays that we fear will not be fulfilled as well. So, not unlike the Jewish people of Jesus’ day, we too, may feel that we are living in times of hopelessness and apathy. So we, too, are waiting for the Messiah to return: to be revealed in all his glory and to bring the kingdom of God in all its fullness.

Today we lit the first of four candles on our Advent wreath. It is the candle of hope. In the midst of the chaos of these times, past and present, and in our Gospel text for today there is a ray of hope. Embedded in the passage from Luke chapter 21 we have a small parable about fig trees. In Jesus’ day a fig tree was widely associated with joy and the abundance of life. Its large leaves and size provided comforting shade during the day, and its fruit, which was easily dried, provided a rich source of nourishment well into the winter months. The “ideal future” or what became known by God’s people as “the messianic age” was pictured by the prophet Micah as “every man under his own vine and under his own fig tree.” (See Micah 4:4).

So when Jesus uses a fig tree in his parable in this reading from Luke chapter 21, the effect is a bit of a shock. The leafing of the fig tree would normally have been associated with prosperity and the certainty of bountiful days ahead. Yet here Jesus connects it with cataclysms on a global and even cosmic scale – scary signs in the skies, panic on the earth at the seas surpassing their accustomed bounds, and roaring everywhere.

All of this sounds like bad news to me! Not the kind of weather forecast I would like to hear for Thomasville! Why does Jesus then compare the coming of all this scary stuff to the leafing of the fig tree that signals the coming of summer? Because, ironically, the leafing of the fig tree in his parable points to destruction – past, present, or yet to come – that

becomes the basis on which a radically new order emerges. In other words, the old must pass away before the new can come.

Luke records Jesus as saying: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.” The summer time of Jesus’ prophecy is the kingdom of God.

Jesus says that when the fig tree puts forth leaves one can tell that summer has arrived. Jesus continues that when this has happened the kingdom of God will be at hand. So the fig tree is actually a symbol of the Messianic advent. The resurrection time, God’s Kingdom, is figuratively described as a summer time in Jesus’ prophetic parable in Luke 21, as well as in Matthew 24.

The message on this First Sunday of Advent is this: The kingdom of God is near! The winter time of human suffering, as a result of cosmic and human frailty, will come to an end. The summer time of God’s Kingdom with its healing light and warmth is at our doors!

Fig trees are one of the last trees to sprout leaves in the region of Jerusalem. Once the fig tree finally pushed forth its leaves, the people of Jesus’ day knew that summer was just around the corner. As I mentioned earlier, a fig tree was a symbol of peace and prosperity in ancient Israel. Summer was a time of new hope, a time of abundant food and easy living, after a long winter in which food and comfort were scarce. Summer came as a peaceful time of warmth and full bellies, while winter was an uncertain time of growling stomachs and cold bones.

During this season of Advent, as we anticipate a summer time of peace to arrive, let us remember to wait and watch without distractions. Let us keep our heads above the commercial chaos of the holiday season that surrounds us everywhere we turn. Let us allow all those sales promotions, TV ads, radio announcements, and twinkling lights to swirl around us, but not to let them drag us down! Let us remember that we are living in a time of great expectation for the arrival of the Prince of Peace who will never disappoint us.

The Advent message is one of hope: a hope which gives us the courage to go through the long winter months with the assurance that summer will come again. This is the promise

of the Lord. Christians call it “salvation” – past, present, and future. We look forward to being saved to the uttermost, as John Wesley put it, and this hope is not in vain. Once winter is over there will be the new sunlight of God’s presence coming into our lives enlightening everything. Although we must pass through winter, we do so with the courage only God can give. Winter is no longer a time of barrenness; it is a time of great expectation, wondering how God will do God’s great things around us and within us.

As we read daily newspaper reports and listen to nightly TV reports of war and crime, of child kidnappings and domestic abuse, of down-sizing and joblessness, let us not be overcome with a sense of helplessness and hopelessness. Instead, let the feelings that these reports stir up inside of us become a call to prayer and a nurturing of the hope that is within us. We can trust that God will hear our prayers and that God knows the place of pain and chaos from which we pray.

Like God’s people of old, gazing at the fig tree, waiting for their wintertime without a king to end, we too should gaze expectantly at the fig tree (or any tree) outside our window, watching for a hint of green to show itself beneath the brown scaly bark of the branches. When the leaf unfurls we, too, will know that summer is just around the corner. A new season – a reign of peace and justice – has begun and will be fulfilled with the arrival of the Prince of Peace, born humbly in a stable, and – as some artists have poignantly portrayed – lying in a manger with a twig from a fig tree clasped in his tiny hand.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.