

The Days Are Coming

Jeremiah 33: 14-16

Luke 21: 25-36

When we hear people talk about end times, they point to world events and say that surely the day of Jesus' return is coming soon. Some folks can be quite elaborate in their descriptions, making all kinds of connections to proof texts in scripture that would seem to make their case. However, it takes a very, very narrow perspective on history to get such an argument off the ground. Think of all of the history that we'd have to pass over in order to reach the conclusion that these are the last days, that somehow these times are worse than all those other times when things were much more desperate in so many different ways.

When I hear something like, 'the days are coming,' I think of *The Honeymooners*, the old 50s TV sitcom with Jackie Gleason as Ralph Kramden and his deadpan wife Alice Kramden played wonderfully by Audrey Meadows. Ralph would find his own words and actions turned against him by Alice, and boxed into a corner, would threaten with great an explosively expressive face to his indifferent wife, "One of these days, Alice! One of these days! Bang! Zoom! To the moon!" In today's politically correct environment, Ralph may not be allowed to make such a threatening remark to his wife and have it appear as comedy. But most viewers would see the humor in bombastic Ralph blowing his top while his placid wife looked on in pained dismay at his childish behavior.

We also knew that "One of these days, Alice" was sort of unreal space in time, much as one might begin a fairy tale with "Once upon a time." We should probably take the scriptural expression about "the days are coming" in a context that is also not particularly definitive about when those days are to come, much less how those days are to come, or what will bring them about or characterize them.

What we should be paying attention to is the promise in such a statement. Instead, we get all caught up in the threatening language, the events of tribulation and destruction, and the fear factor of it all. But when we get up close and think it through, we find a very different perspective that should be much more helpful.

In our reading, the prophet Jeremiah recounts God's word to him when he begins, "The days are coming...." You need to know that the king at this time has placed Jeremiah under house arrest as Babylon's army bears down on Jerusalem. "The days are coming," indeed! The coming days for the holy city promise to be vicious and devastating. Jeremiah is disturbingly clear about what coming days will bring, and his words that prophesy the bloody conquest of the city and the nation are precisely what landed him under house arrest for such treasonous talk against king and kingdom. Candidly speaking the truth doesn't make you any friends in high places. Palace prophets like Jeremiah are supposed to engage in happy talk that's supportive of the regime, regardless of how stupidly inane such commentary might be.

While the coming days reflect dread and disaster, the prophet has a God's-eye vision to share, one that looks beyond the immediate and into the future. In the verses preceding our reading, the Lord's word to Jeremiah declares that despite the evil and sin of the people, and despite the horrible times ahead, God will "bring health and healing ... abundant peace and security." A series of seven oracles starts, describing how God will forgive and restore the people and the holy city, providing them with "abundant prosperity and peace." That's quite a surprise.

In verse 10, it says: *This is what the Lord says: You say about this place, "It is a desolate waste, without men or animals." Yet in [the places] that are deserted...there will be heard once more the sounds of joy and gladness, the voices of bride and bridegroom, and the voices of those who bring thank offerings to the house of the Lord.* This is a remarkable view given the circumstances they're facing and the certainty of dire outcomes as the city is surrounded by marauding invaders. It's the prophet's reminder that God is working far ahead of their present, always working out the future, the fulfillment of his promise.

In our reading, we hear about God's plan to raise up a new leader, returning to the promise of an ideal king from the line of King David. But Jeremiah really has little use for kings; he's seen their self-centered politics and their corrupt ambitions. So, we have to consider the quality of this leader to understand what Jeremiah prophesies.

This leader will be known for his righteousness, indeed that's how he will be named: **The Lord Our Righteousness**. Jeremiah rolls together the images of prosperity and peace, forgiveness and faithful devotion with the image of a leader who embodies and upholds justice and righteousness before God. Those are the two key qualities that God expects in leadership of his people. You cannot have the good benefits without the commitment to justice and righteousness by the leader who is faithful to God.

Jeremiah's word from God tells how God is looking ahead, how God will bring forth a new grace from promises begun in a past age in the anointing of his Davidic servant-king. This promise transcends the corrupt and fallen present in order to fulfill God's vision for the future. But it's an incredible word for those who hear it. Indeed, they may scoff at it as pie-in-the-sky, airy-fairy dreaminess. As their world is in imminent collapse, Jeremiah tells them to watch for the signs of God's work, for "the days are coming."

We see that "the days are coming" are not days of violence and destruction, although in their predicament, violence and destruction are definitely expected in immediate days. These "days are coming" refer to a time on God's calendar when the promise of God will be brought to fulfillment. These "days are coming" point out into the future, God's future, a time invisible to the naked eye, a season improbable to the attentive bystander, but a point that the one who trust in God and God's promise trusts as a matter of pure faith. Looking around, it seems ridiculous. Looking into the heart of God's promise, it seems a certainty to the prophet.

Perhaps Jeremiah is hoping that the time has finally come when God's people will

no longer trust in their army, no longer trust in their wealth, and no longer trust in the kings and ministers and their schemes and conniving to avert disaster. Take away all of their self-serving assets and confidences, and then maybe they will finally turn and put their trust in their God. When they do, then they will echo the prophet's words, "the days are coming."

While Jeremiah lights and fans the tender flame of hope and faith amid the impending doom of Babylon's ruthless onslaught, we find the same images of terror, calamity and destruction when Jesus speaks in Luke 21. The sky will reveal ominous signs both day and night while on earth, the seas of primordial chaos churn out of control once again as nations are thrown into disarray and confusion, as order collapses and people faint with terror at what is coming upon the world. This catastrophic vision of Jesus sets the stage for the coming of the Son of Man in power and great glory, the time of the end of the age as the righteous One of God comes to fulfill God's will.

Jesus connects with the prophetic tradition of God's promise of a Righteous One, the servant leader who stands for justice and righteousness, the vision of God's promise that had been given new voice by Jeremiah amid the Babylonian siege on Jerusalem. Indeed, in the preceding paragraph, Jesus spoke of coming days when Jerusalem will again be punished and destroyed by invaders, echoing the voices of past prophets.

Jesus then remarks to them about the fig tree. You can tell the season by looking at the fig tree, right? In the same way, you'll know the season of God's promise is near. The brief parable of the fig tree is clearly meant to make it clear that signs of the end times will be as unmistakable as the flowering and the fruit-bearing of the fig tree.

I think we need to push that meaning. We need to know that such events signaling an end time have not happened. But we have had plenty of events that fit some of those descriptions. This is what keeps the end times people in business and has people popularly saying that surely the last days are upon us. People have been saying this for two millennia. Have we misunderstood?

Perhaps we should see the common experience of the fig tree in a year of seasons, always progressing toward the season of fruit-bearing. It's a continual cycle of seasons. Looking at worldly events, it's also a never ending cycle of days, times, and seasons when the world seems to be coming part, when destruction and violence seem out of control, when social order seems frayed to the breaking point, when demagogues fan the flames of division and militancy, when all the world seems to teeter on the precipice, and our lives may feel like they're in constant turmoil and distress.

What if it isn't that "the days are coming?" What if, like the constant turning of the seasons, the days are already here? What if the days of God's coming promise are today, and tomorrow, and the next day? Then that special season of God's promise is not some chronological point in time, or a confluence of ghastly events, or an upheaval in the natural order of earth, and sea, and sky. Then the special season of God's promise is really about the day of our own awakening to God's promise, realizing that that promise is ready for us here and now, today, tomorrow, and the next day. The only thing

preventing our engagement of the day of God's promise is our own awareness and our active engagement with God's promise. Without dismissing the calamitous signs announced by this passage in Luke, or dismissing the notion of Jesus' triumphant return, perhaps we should seriously consider a more productive perspective. Consider that the day of the Lord's promise is coming, not in some hazy, distant future. Try later on today, or maybe tomorrow.

At the same time that Jesus points to signs of God's promise in coming days, it seems obvious that **Jesus** is God's promise and he is standing there *right in front of them!* He might as well be asking them, 'You're so worried about tomorrow, do you know what day it is *today?*'

The special season of God's promise can really about the day of our own awakening to God's promise for us. Let's hear the words of that last paragraph in our reading from Luke once more: *Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be 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.*

Jesus calls on his disciples to be alert, to watch, for the days are coming. Jesus doesn't want his disciples to be distracted by stupid stuff. He doesn't want them to be caught unawares, to be surprised when the days come. He wants his disciples to watch and be aware, trusting their faithfulness. Only by faith will they be led to realize that not only are the days coming in the future, the days of God's promise are here and now.

This is the journey we begin today on the first Sunday of Advent, the journey into the promise of God for you.