

First Sunday of Advent- C
November 29, 2015
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

Jeremiah 33:14-16
Psalm 25:1-10
1 Thessalonians 3:9-13
Luke 21:25-36

[Click here to read scripture passages for this Sunday](#)

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

In today's reading from the book Jeremiah, we hear that God will fulfill God's promise and raise up a branch that will bring renewal to God's people.

If you're wondering how a branch could be such good news - branches are beautiful and all but not usually cause for huge celebration - think family tree.

A new branch on a family tree, either a baby or a newly adopted child, has a way of giving people hope for the future.

It never ceases to amaze me how the entry of a child into a home has the capacity to make it new, regardless of circumstances - planned or unplanned, poverty or wealth. A birth or adoption brings with it challenges to be sure, but also the hope and expectation that things can once again be set right.

We have a situation much like this in our gospel reading for today.

The circumstances described in Luke 21 are not favorable: the earth distressed, the nations confused, the people fearful, the creation roaring as the sea escapes its bounds.

This sounds a lot like news headlines we've read lately.

Yet Jesus speaks of a thing that can enter into the midst of all this chaos and give us a reason to be hopeful about the future, a reason to believe that things can be set right again. Something new that has the capacity to shake up the heavens and the earth is coming.

It is the Kingdom of God.

And Jesus uses a simple, beautiful image to represent this kingdom, a fig tree - a fig tree in full bloom, readying itself for a new season of growth and the renewal of life that comes with it.

So today we have two images of hope: a new branch on a family tree; and the kingdom of God coming like new life comes to a tree.

In this season of the church year, the season Advent, we wait and prepare for both of these things to happen.

Advent means coming and in Advent:

- we wait and prepare for the coming of a baby - for the birth of Jesus again among us;
- and we wait and prepare for the kingdom of God to fully come among us and make all things new.

As we wait and prepare, we learn how to hope in the face of despair and fear.

When the world seems hopeless and full of death, we learn to trust God's promise that a new branch will arise, new life will come.

We learn to be like a family preparing for the arrival of a child.

To prepare for a child, we must face our fears about the future, but more importantly, we dwell on our deepest hopes.

What will a child mean for us and how will we live as a result of the child's arrival?

What does the coming birth of Jesus among us mean?

The Gospel of Luke, the Gospel we'll be hearing from throughout this new church year, gives us some clues.

According to Luke, Jesus's birth shows that God keeps God's promises. God has said there will be a new branch and it has come and will come again in Jesus.

We can live in trust that God has not and will not abandon us. God keeps promises. Jesus' birth in Luke also shows how God works.

God comes in humble, ordinary ways - being born to peasants like Mary and Joseph. Yet, this humble birth has the power to turn the world around.

When Mary learns she will bear God's son she sings her glorious Magnificat declaring what it means that God's Messiah will be born to a peasant. It means that the proud will be torn down and the lowly lifted up; the rich will be sent away empty and the hungry filled with good things.

Preparing for this baby to be born among us again means asking God to tear down all that is high and mighty within us, and looking to God alone to lift us up and fill us up.

It means expecting that God is turning the world around and joining God in that work.

In Advent we not only prepare for a baby, we also wait and prepare for the final coming of the kingdom of God, at the end of time, to make all things new.

This waiting can be overwhelming as we consider all the problems in our world and all the ways we need God's kingdom to come now and set things right. It can be disconcerting as we wonder what to make of all the painful events in our world.

But in the mist of all this, Jesus directs us to look at the blooming fig tree. Jesus gives a place to focus when all seems frightening.

He tells us to look to common, everyday signs that God is still in our midst, that God is still creating life, that the kingdom is near and is coming.

Jesus turns us to look at signs like a spring tree in full bloom despite the distress of the very earth from which it draws life.

In fact, in some ways it seems Jesus is telling us to be a bit like a blooming tree.

We are to be like a tree turning our heads toward the sun and stretching out our arms in prayer to receive the new thing that God is doing

Rather than shriveling up in fear, drunkenness and worry, Jesus tells us to stand up, raise up our heads, be on guard, be alert, and pray at all times - the kingdom of God is near.

We are to raise our heads to the sun and reach out in prayer.

In the season of Advent we are invited to stand up and be alert for signs of God's coming kingdom. And, these signs are all around us:

as we light candles against the darkness;
as we prepare for the birth of a humble baby;
as we take evergreen trees into our homes and our sanctuary
and light them with hope;
as we gather with loved ones;
as we refuse to be controlled by fear but continue to welcome and
love;
as we respond to suffering with care and compassion.

As we do all these simple, ordinary things, we are looking to and offering signs of the coming kingdom.

The time of Advent provides us with a whole season of waiting and preparing for a child, a whole season of watching for simple, everyday signs that God is still in our midst, a whole season of living in alertness to God's kingdom.

And just as we can easily imagine in our minds a spring tree in stunning summer bloom, so today we are invited to another imagining: That Jesus has come; that Jesus will come again.

And that his coming has and will create in us and in the world a flourishing like that of a tree: Arms spread wide in welcome, faces raised to the sun, roots deeply embedded in nourishing earth, and a life that is ever made new, ready for a new season of growth provided by God's gracious hand until that time when God makes all things new.

Thanks be to God.