

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent  
Sermon 12.1.24

**Jeremiah 33:14-16**

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. <sup>15</sup> In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. <sup>16</sup> In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness."

**Luke 21:25-36**

"There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. <sup>26</sup> People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. <sup>27</sup> Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. <sup>28</sup> Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." <sup>29</sup> Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; <sup>30</sup> as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. <sup>31</sup> So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. <sup>32</sup> Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. <sup>33</sup> Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. <sup>34</sup> "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, <sup>35</sup> like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. <sup>36</sup> 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. (351)

Sadie once said to me about her sometimes coming to church here that she chose this one (of all the many there are to choose from) mostly because of its windows. She likes the many clear-glass windows, the clear daylight that always fills our Sunday morning services.

I remember this in part because I can relate. I grew up going to church most Sunday mornings, and my church's sanctuary was like this one, with bigger though fewer clear-glass windows.

It's cultivated in me, or confirmed in me, a turning toward a window whenever I'm in thought, searching for a word or thinking through a question. It's also made me wary of any place where there isn't a sense of the outdoors, especially those that feel built to obscure the fact of context, obscured even to the correct time of day. Shopping malls and casinos are both built to obscure the feeling of the passing of time. They're built to contain your mind in the business of the built place.

Funny thing: that idea took root in cathedrals of old. These also are built environments meant to contain, though I'd argue with less cynical intent. They're meant to tell a different story than the one out there in the world. Here there would be beauty, even for common people. Here

there would be inspiration, even for the unlearned. Here the labor that awaits you just outside those doors isn't present and pressing upon you: this is your sanctuary, your sabbath rest.

They also tell a different story of time. In those stained-glass windows are different events of scripture, and they're arranged by a logic other than the chronologic—and they're certainly not meant to refer to the time of day. Rather, they in effect obscure the time of day.

Cathedrals are in a sense sanctuaries away from time, its passing and keeping account.

We lose that effect when we gather in sanctuaries with clear-glass windows.

And yet we have Advent.

Advent is a season that would disorient us in time.

This is the first Sunday of Advent, which is the first season of the church year. Four weeks, spent in anticipation of the incarnation of God, spent in anticipation of the birth of the baby Jesus, it has us all over time. We begin at the end, or at least at *an* end. Every year Advent launches from a time of breakdown, the end of the age, whether that's understood historically or eschatologically (which is to speak of God's ultimate and glorious end). We begin as we just heard from the Gospel of Luke as things are coming apart, the known world, the built world and governed world and managed world: it's all coming apart.

We're with Jesus here at the end of this life in the world. He has finally come to Jerusalem, the capital city where the confrontation will take place, the confrontation with the powers and principalities that governed his world at his time but that are akin to those that govern the world at whatever time. He's come to Jerusalem knowing it would land him under arrest, undergoing a trial, and at last being crucified.

While here, in the Temple, he's provoked one set of power-players after another, and there was indeed fear and foreboding. At the time Jesus lived, his people struggled cautiously under the newly established Roman empire. It was still newly the case that the power of the empire was making itself known, even in far-flung places like Judea. As for the time when this gospel was written, things had turned terrifying. As the empire had grown more menacing, Judeans grew less willing to suffer its dictates. A staged revolt early in the 60s resulted in a vicious crackdown under the hand of the emperor Nero (whose name can be figured numerologically "666"), thus beginning the long and bloody Roman-Jewish War.

Sixty years long, this war decimated the Jewish population, had a majority fleeing into the faraway hills, and resulted in the utter destruction of Jerusalem, of the Temple, of this point of

connection amidst the creation. The Temple was umbilical in its nurturing power, the point of connection between the world as in utero and its universal, creative God as its enfolding mother.

And now that connection had been lost.

Jesus would say of such a time as this, these are but the beginning of the birth pangs.

Advent begins in such an ending, and moves what we might feel as backward through time, next week in the middle of Jesus' life, at the beginning of his ministry, and so as well the following week, and then the last week in Advent in Bethlehem, hearing from Mary upon her receiving word of her pregnancy: something astonishingly new was to be born.

Advent begins in the trumpet blasts of war and ends in a lullaby.

It's exactly right that music should be this season's fullest expression.

To be honest, with *Melodious Accord* our welcome guests today, it was also a challenge to give place to one more moment in this story's time. The first Sunday of Advent already has a lot going on, even more so when it falls on the first Sunday of the month, which it doesn't always. Sometimes Advent squeezes itself into the end of November. But when it arrives on the first Sunday of December, it has us also around the communion table, which here at Church on the Hill we do only once a month. On the first Sunday of the month, and which is still another moment in story-time. Given all this spinning disorientation, it wouldn't surprise me if we all left worship feeling a little drunk, though the cups of wine are very small (and half of them contain grape juice).

It was a challenge worth taking on because music is this season's fullest expression—and not only from a practical point of view, which we all know (Christmas music amounts to a rich library of every conceivable genre), but also from a theological point of view, a *Christological* point of view.

There is something so gratuitous about music. It's the only creative endeavor that serves no practical purpose. True, it can be *put* to practical purpose. You can use music to psych yourself up or to chill yourself out. Politics will use music to stir patriotic sentiment. Power-players will use music to move people to do their bidding, to march them to war, to move them to vote. But music's origin is simply in spontaneous expression. And it is universal, every human culture making its music, though it serves no purpose in the sustaining of life in the most basic sense. Evolutionary psychologists have to work *very hard* to come up with their always so uninspiring, "Why?"

It's also universal in that the creation itself makes music. I was out for a walk the other day and a voice came from the woods around me. It sounded full of intention; it sounded human. The

dogs and I both stopped, looked around. It was a tree intoning, a falling tree caught by yet-standing tree, and the wind moving it just enough that in intoned.

There's a whole school of theological thought that appreciates music as theology's true language. Its beauty; its excess, but never formlessness; it's a spilling over, jubilant proclaiming of glory without "explaining" it: this is David Bentley Hart in the early pages of a book I started reading this week, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*. I just happened to pick it up this week, though it's been on my shelf for months. I read this of beauty, of excess but not formlessness, of spilling over jubilation, of glory without explanation, and my first thought was, "Thank God these kids are coming."

So, sing to us, Melodious Accord, of the gratuitous nature of the incarnation of God. God didn't to come into his creation because God had to. God didn't *need* to do this, neither for his own sake nor for ours. God couldn't help but to do this, God who is creative love and therefore couldn't help but to create what is most truly the fruit of creative love, the human, the human being.

Sing to us of this which music is itself a likewise gratuitous—for how can we help but to sing?

Make music, please, that the explaining might end and the wonder might begin.

Thanks be to God.