

Night Journeys

Jeremiah 33: 14-16; Luke 21: 25-36

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Rev. Dr. Charles Parker

I. Introduction

Thanksgiving is one of my very favorite holidays. You've got a built-in four-day weekend, which is hard to beat, and lots of good food, some wonderful time with family, and an opportunity to reflect on one of our significant spiritual disciplines which is the discipline of giving thanks for all that we have been given. And it also feels to me like one of those rare holidays that has not been overly commercialized yet -- there's still time -- other than of course Black Friday which kicks off what is often called the pre-Christmas season where we get bombarded with messages continually about how important it is that we purchase things, and that gets supplemented often with a healthy dose of cheap manufactured sentimentality. But for us in the church, pre-Christmas goes by a different name which is Advent.

Advent is from a Latin word that means "coming." And it's the time when we prepare ourselves for both to celebrate the coming of Jesus as an infant in Bethlehem and the wonder of the incarnation as well as when we prepare ourselves for Christ coming again in final victory, and the tenor of the season shifts throughout so that we start off looking forward to the final coming of God's kingdom and then we move to reflecting on the wonder of the nativity. And you heard that looking forward in our Gospel and Hebrew Scripture lesson today.

Often during the course of Advent our wonderful musicians will share with us some wonderful musical celebration. Our choirs are combining this year for a single service next week when we're going to hear a delightful opera called *Amahl and the Night Visitors*. *Amahl and the Night Visitors* was actually the first opera written for television and was commissioned by NBC and debuted, premiered, on Christmas Eve in 1951. And it's a delightful drama about a poor, disabled shepherd boy named Amahl who lives with his mother near Bethlehem. One night they get a knock on their door and find themselves talking to three foreigners from a faraway land who had been following a star. So, I'm going to leave it there because we'll get the chance to hear it all next week but as we reflect on our lectionary texts throughout this Advent, we're going to be using *Amahl and the Night Visitors* as sort of our through theme and looking at who our night visitors are and what they have to teach us.

II. Night

It's interesting to me how many of the critical elements of the Christmas narrative take place at night. Of course, the arrival of the magi and the angels serenading the shepherds and the shepherds going to see the new born king, and of course the birth itself and the vision that takes the Holy Family from Bethlehem down to Egypt. All of these wonderful events are blanketed by the night. And that's interesting to me, of

course, because throughout scripture and throughout all of our literature, night is the scary time, night is the time when we encounter the unknown and often the dangerous. There's a reason that children are afraid of the dark when the lights go out. Or in the *Game of Thrones*, they keep telling us that the night is dark and full of terrors, if you happen to be a *Game of Thrones* fan. The symbol of God and God's power is always light, a light that stands in opposition to the darkness. So, it's notable that all of these wondrous stories take place in the midst of night. They take place at that time when we feel most vulnerable and most easily frightened. And the message that our scripture passages have for us is that it is exactly at those moments when we encounter the movement of God most powerfully so that Jesus describes through his disciples the end of the world in pretty dramatic and frightening terms. There will be signs and the sun and moon and stars, he says, and conflict among the nations, the heavens will be shaken, and that's exactly when God will come in power.

Now, Christians throughout history have tried to read those passages both in Jesus' preaching and in Paul's writing and tried to figure out exactly when that day is or day will be and have set some fairly specific dates at points, none of which has come to fruition. And it is often pointed out that the way in which he describes those end days could describe many, many points in our history. Because frankly it's fairly rare when there's a moment in history when there aren't nations in conflict with one another. And I wonder maybe if that's part of Jesus' point. Maybe Jesus isn't simply warning us to be prepared for a specific time when the kingdom will come in its fullness. Maybe Jesus is suggesting that whenever the world feels a bit chaotic, whenever it feels like things are spinning out of control, which is exactly the moment when we should be particularly attentive to where the movement of the Holy Spirit is.

III. Visitors

The Prophet Jeremiah in our Hebrew Scripture lesson this morning is writing to the people whose world has been turned upside down as they have been carried off into exile by the Babylonians who have destroyed Jerusalem and burnt down the temple and have upended everything they thought they understood about who God was and who they were. And again, Jeremiah's point is in the very midst of that chaos, at the point when nothing seems to be making sense and it all feels a little out of control, that is exactly the moment that a new branch will break forth from the tree of David and a new savior will arise. An unexpected visitor will enter our lives and start to bring about the kingdom for which we have been longing. Which again is to say that it is exactly those times when our lives feel out of control that we need to be extra watchful for where God is moving and be mindful that the places God will be moving are likely to be unexpected or the people through whom God will be moving are likely to be unexpected.

So, who are the people that have entered our lives recently that we didn't expect to meet? Who are the folks that maybe came to Thanksgiving dinner that hadn't been on the agenda or that joined us for Christmas unexpectedly? How do we engage them? Because the invitation here is to engage them with a sense of expectation that it is through those strangers that God is seeking to speak a word to us. Who are the new

kids in school that we have been maybe ignoring because they weren't part of the clique that we were a member of that may be a gift from God? Who are the people who appear at a crisis point in our work lives when we needed some new blood, a different way of looking at the conflict that may have a word of wisdom for us? All of those are opportunities Jesus and Jeremiah remind us for hearing the word of God in a different way.

I also want to suggest that what is true of us as individuals is also true of us as a national community. And just as Jeremiah was writing to the whole nation of Israel in a time of crisis, God's spirit moves among our nation and our national dialogue in times of crisis as well. And it is exactly at those moments when we are most fearful that we need to be looking most carefully for where God is at work. Let me suggest to you that at this moment when conflicts in the Middle East appear to be spiraling out of control, when tensions with Russia are rising, when we are reeling from terrorist attacks in Paris and Beirut and other parts of the world, our tendency is going to be to close ourselves off, to protect ourselves, to be defensive, because it all feels so scary. And our Advent text this morning are telling us that it is exactly at those moments that we need to do just the opposite of that, to be looking actively for where God is at work often in those visitors that we didn't expect to be knocking at our door.

Our national anxiety, I want to suggest, has been voiced by a number of our political leaders who have encouraged us to not take in refugees from Syria because it's just too scary and too perilous. And dear friends, our message this Advent is that opening our doors to those who are coming in need is exactly what we are called to do as children of God. And that it is those very visitors that we fear that may be bringing us the greatest gift that God has to offer us in this season.

I read a wonderful article this week that suggested that there is no Christmas story without refugees, because the entire narrative is built around people who are fleeing from one place and going to another, whether it's Mary and Joseph being forced out of Nazareth to go down to Bethlehem, whether it's the magi who were being called out of wherever they come from to seek the king of the Jews, whether it's the Holy Family being called to flee from Herod's wrath and go to Egypt, the whole narrative is a narrative of people who are refugees and who get welcomed in by strangers. So, whether they're refugees from Syria fleeing conflict in the Middle East, whether they are refugees from Mexico and Central America seeking a new way of life and new opportunities, our call is to open our doors and welcome them as brothers and sisters, as fellow children of God.

IV. Conclusion

Thanksgiving, dear friends, is a celebration of those of our forbearers who fled their homeland in order to worship as they felt God calling them to worship. It's a story of people who are fleeing religious persecution, who are looking for more economic opportunity, and who landed on a strange shore with not enough resources and who were welcomed by the people who are here. That's what Thanksgiving is about. That's

what we are about as Americans and as Christians. They were welcomed, they were nourished, they were supported, and they found a new home.

We have that same call now, to open up our nation and welcome new peoples from whatever part of the world they come, who are seeking a new life and a new home. And our Advent texts remind us that when we do that in the midst of our fear, and maybe especially in the midst of our fear, we will find God at work often in the very lives that we were most fearful of.

Amen.