

Scripture Reading

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. 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. 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".

Sometimes actors do things that seem stupid to us when they are examined after the fact.

Burt Lancaster was offered the lead in *Ben-Hur* in 1959. Lancaster turned it down, and the role of Judah Ben-Hur went to Charlton Heston. Heston won the Academy Award that year.

Sean Connery has been a recipient of a career making role and declining a potentially lucrative financial role.

On the financial front -- Connery was a strong candidate to play Gandalf, the wizard from *The Lord of the Rings*. Connery rejected the part because he did not want to spend 18 months filming in New Zealand. Sir Ian McKellen took the Gandalf role – where he was nominated for Academy Award level recognition.

But Sean had earlier luck with someone else's bad decisions -- the original 1960s era producers of what they were pretty sure would be a series on James Bond -- approached *Cary Grant* first about playing the part of 007. Grant declined ...Sean Connery was cast as Bond. The rest as they say is history..

Gene Hackman and Michelle Pfeiffer were originally cast in the two central roles in *Silence of the Lambs* -- Hannibal Lecter and Agent Starling. Both dropped out and when *Silence of the Lambs* was made in 1990, the lead roles were played by Anthony Hopkins and Jodie Foster. Both won Academy Awards for their performances.

Other examples exist – and I could go on but I think you get the idea

And I for one, and I would guess you, have to wonder if these actors and actresses had understood at the beginning of the story what the end of the story was going to reveal – how that might have changed their responses.

Today is the First Sunday of Advent – and Advent may sound fancy and complicated but it has a very simple meaning – it means the arrival.

We Understand the Beginning, By Understanding the End

For example –

Since the advent of television – means since the arrival of television.

Since the advent of the printing press – means since the arrival of the printing press.

Since the advent of anything – means since the arrival of that thing.

Advent is a word we still use – but not as much as in the past.

Here – in the church year – the word advent reminds us of what it is that we are about to celebrate at Christmas with the arrival of the Human Face of God into the world.

We are about to celebrate an arrival – and more than the arrival of a baby – we are here to celebrate so much more than that – because God has given us some foretaste of the end story.

And we start at the beginning of the church year, with the end of the story.

It is the practice in our honoring of the yearly cycle of suggested scriptures and themes that is the church year – that we don't start this celebration with the beginning of the story of Jesus and what he means, but ratherit is the suggested practice for the church year to start by discussing the end.

We do this because the arrival we celebrate -- brings about a change in what we expect to happen at the end.

Said another way: We understand the beginning of the salvation story, by first understanding where it is going ... where it is going to end.

Using the actors I just mentioned to you – if they had understood how their actions would end – would they have made the decisions they did at the beginning?

Doubtful.

Advent begins with us trying to make some sense of the story – and we start off that attempt to have it make sense -- by looking at the end – rather than the beginning. We draw the sense from the arrival, by looking at the end

Our passage from Jeremiah helps us to frame that point ... with Jeremiah – on behalf of God -- telling the Children of Israel and Judah that the end of the story will be good.

The days are surely coming when ... I [and this is God talking here] will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land...And this is the name by which it [that is – the Branch] will be called: “The Lord is our righteousness

We Understand the Beginning, By Understanding the End

It isn't just going to be good – it is going to be everything thing that they don't have now.

Let's be clear – when Jeremiah was talking and being written down – things were not going well.

The Kingdom to the North had been conquered and laid waste. It had vanished from the future world – historical remnants only – but not a future kingdom.

Jeremiah's Kingdom – to the South – was being laid waste as he talks and writes – but to follow the prophecy of Jeremiah as he speaks on behalf of God – not to vanish from history.

There will be at some future time – a time – when justice and righteousness will prevail.

Justice and Righteousness will frame and define the future story.

The world may not now be just – and when Jeremiah was talking – it certainly was not a place where the Lamb could lie down with the Lion and expect to get up whole again – but the idea that is projected from this scripture is that at some future time – we will have a world where justice and righteousness prevail – and in fact – we will be led to that by an element of the Davidic line which will provide for it – reminding us that it is through God that we come to a state of righteousness.

Justice and righteousness are generally the same word – in both Greek and Hebrew -- in this sense. Both have to do with the overall theme of relationship – when things are in right relationship – then the world is in a just state. When we are in proper relationship with God, others, and ourselves – a state of righteousness exists.

Human Justice has to do with the rights of others – recognizing them and further, establishing them. But this isn't about Human Justice – it is about Justice as defined within a framework associated with God – and when we are truly living in a world where everything is truly just – where everything is in proper balance – someone has to tilt the scales a little.

God does that – because God tilts the scales towards the concept to produce a truly biblically based justice and righteousness and we call it – mercy.

God is merciful to us – and God does this through the extension to of us his Grace – Grace – which allows us to be in right relationship – a state of righteousness –

With God

With others –

And with ourselves.

And Jeremiah – knows that we really don't have a true idea of what this near perfect state of Grace will look like – and he wants to give us just a little foretaste of it – by telling us about in terms we might be able to understand.

David Peterson, a former Presbyterian pastor, tells about a time when he was preparing a sermon. His little daughter came in and said, "Daddy, can we play?"

He answered, "I'm awfully sorry, Sweetheart, but I'm right in the middle of preparing this sermon. In about an hour I can play."

She said, "Okay, when you're finished, Daddy, I am going to give you a great big hug."

He said, "Thank you very much." She went to the door and (these are his words):

"Then she did a U-turn and came back and gave me a chiropractic, bone-breaking hug." David said to her, "Darling, you said you were *going* to give me a hug *after* I finished."

She answered, "Daddy, I just wanted you to know what you have to look forward to!"¹

We start the new Church year – today – with this service – by talking about what **it** is we have to look forward to.

For Pastor Peterson – the **it** was that “chiropractic, bone breaking hug”.

What is **IT** we have to look forward to?

I wonder if for some of us **IT** isn't that Easter Sunday moment when we can sing after that long Lenten reflection – about Christ the Lord being Risen Today.

I wonder if for some of us **IT** isn't about seeing people join the church.

I wonder if for some of us **IT** isn't about seeing babies baptized and children come up in increasingly larger numbers for children's time.

I wonder if for some of us **IT** isn't about the connection they get with the sacred when they hear Gina sing or Tiffany play.

I wonder [trail off]

These are of course, all parts of the story – but they aren't the whole story – they aren't **IT**.

The arrival we celebrate is about the human face of God coming into the world ...

But know this –

¹ Dale Bruner, "Is Jesus Inclusive or Exclusive?" *Theology, News, and Notes* (October 1999), p. 3

Justice and righteousness are more than a little baby. But to get to where God is carrying the story the little baby is included.

Justice and righteousness are more than Calvary. But to get to where God is carrying the story Calvary is included.

Justice and righteousness are more than only about Easter – But to get to where God is carrying the story Easter is included – and in fact – it is the center piece to the story – not Christmas.

But you can't get to an Empty Tomb in Jerusalem without an arrival in a manger at Bethlehem.

So we start the year with the Advent theme – because of this arrival -- things are going to be different and we have a clue – a foretaste – an indication of what it is we have to look forward to. Whatever **IT** is ... **IT** is about the end of the story

And we want to celebrate today – that while we don't know precisely what **IT** is – we are getting a foretaste of **IT** here – now – today – in this very place.

And this foretaste comes as a result of one action on our part – an assent – a declaration of our faith in Christ as the center of our universe – by that declaration we say that we want to be included in this kingdom to come.

We want to be Judah Ben-Hur.

We want to be Gandalf.

We want to be Agent Starling.

We *might* even want to play the role of the Cannibal Hannibal Lecter *Might*.

We want that role – because we know – how the story is going to turn out.

And we have a clue – an idea – a foretaste of how that final story is going to end –

When we celebrate communion – as we are going to do in a few minutes —after we have declared the mystery of faith –

After we say -- *that Christ has died, Christ is risen; Christ will come again* –

I will ask the HS to be poured out on US gathered here – so that

“we may be for the world the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood Make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world[and in the narrative I will tell you for how long] – until Christ comes in final victory, and we feast at his heavenly banquet.

The communion meal we are about to eat – is a foretaste of the meal to come It is an opportunity for us to have an idea of ‘what it is we have to look forward to!’

We look forward to a time of Justice – righteousness – and completeness – shalom – with everything in proper balance And it all begins with the arrival into the world – of the human face of God.

I pray that none of us here today will be turning down God's roles for us – because we know the end of the story.

Let's open our Hymnals to page 7 and let us respond to the invitation to partake of the foretaste of that heavenly banquet that is found there

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