

Promises Fulfilled

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship with Communion
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC
December 2, 2018 – 1st Sunday of Advent
Text: Jeremiah 33:14-16

Christmas is coming. But we know that, don't we? For one thing our annual and quite amazing Christmas Bazaar was yesterday. Greens and wreaths and mini-Christmas trees and Christmas cookies were present in abundance, along with many of you. Another clue is the Christmas decorations everywhere in the stores and slowly appearing in our neighborhoods and our own homes. Christmas is coming – with all the expectations we layer upon it and ourselves each year. And, let's not forget the anxieties inherent in anticipating Christmas. Gifts to be purchased, cards to be sent, cookies to be baked, special meals to be planned and carried out, decorations to be put up, Christmas trees to be decorated. But, before you can decorate the tree, you have to purchase it – if you're a live tree family. Or, if you prefer artificial, you have to get it out of the box which you first have to dig out of wherever it is you keep it the other 11 months of the year. [Sigh...]

Christmas is coming, and with it a whole host of additional worries and anxieties that society places upon it and upon us. But, that's not what anticipating Christmas is really all about. At least, that's not what the Christian tradition of which we are a part believes that Christmas is all about. In fact, our faith teaches us

that waiting for Christmas is really about something quite different than all the hype we humans have managed to layer upon it over the centuries. Waiting for Christmas – anticipating it and savoring that anticipation in and of itself – is so important to the practice of our Christian faith that this season of waiting has a specific name – Advent – and a unique significance intended to set the tone not only for our celebrations of Christmas, but indeed for the whole year to follow it.

Most folks don't realize that it is in fact Advent which marks the beginning of the new year in the church rather than the totally secular celebration of New Year's on January 1. So, for us who claim the name Christian, this Sunday – the first Sunday of Advent – marks our celebration of the new year dawning in our midst. This is because we orient the practice of the Christian faith around Jesus, his teachings and the exemplars for our relationship with God that we find in his life and the lives of his contemporary followers like Peter and John and Paul. So, it makes sense that our new year in the Christian tradition begins with our anticipation of Jesus' birth. That's actually what we are doing – anticipating, waiting, trusting, remembering – that the millennia-old promises of God to send a Savior into the very heart of us is coming to fruition anew on Christmas. We are not just *remembering* Christmas in the church as we celebrate this Season of Advent. We are, quite literally, preparing for the Christ Child to

be born into our hearts all over again on Christmas Day. Advent, then, is truly a time to prepare to receive the Babe of Bethlehem, the Christ Child, into our church, our homes and, most importantly, our lives during this time of year. Advent is the time we work at trusting, believing, and building our lives around God's promises fulfilled in the Babe of Bethlehem.

To do this work of anticipation of the birth of the Christ Child, we remind ourselves through symbol and story of what those promises fulfilled are. Central to this is the Advent Wreath, with its four candles, usually in shades of blue, pink or purple, to mark the passing of each week of Advent as they are lit. The rituals of the Advent wreath can vary and ours have over the years. Sometimes we anticipate the birth of Jesus by remembering the circumstances of his birth. In that case, each candle stands for the people of the story – the prophets, the shepherds, Mary and Joseph. Other times we recall through these candles the promises made in the Scriptures of just what the Babe of Bethlehem brings to us as our savior. This will be our focus this year as we mark the significance of the promises of God for hope, peace, joy and love born anew in our lives on Christmas in the person of the Jesus Christ.

Let's not forget that central to the lighting of these candles is the light itself. The lighting of each candle symbolizes the light of God coming into our lives as we wait, bringing the spark of hope,

the illumination of peace, the flame of joy and the warmth of love to life with special focus. The light of God, then, shines brighter through the candles of the Advent wreath, showing us the way forward when life gets overwhelming and the darkness all around threatens to overwhelm. The light of God growing ever brighter each week on the Advent wreath makes plain the way forward in our lives that God would have us follow. The light of God in Advent is a tangible reminder that with God, all things are possible. How wonderful is that.

During the first two weeks of Advent, we are reminded of the longing for God's tangible presence in the midst of God's people through the prophecies of the wise ones of the Hebrew Scriptures – the prophets. There are many prophets, most of whom speak in some way about the Messiah, the Redeemer, God promises to send to the people. Most well known are the texts of Isaiah and we will hear these again at our Lessons and Carols service on Christmas Sunday, December 23. But, other prophets too speak about God's promises to be made real in the future by the "promised one". One of those prophets is Jeremiah, whose words of prophecy we heard read a few moments ago.

Jeremiah was making his prophecies in the midst of the people of God who had been carried captive into exile into Babylon. Their hearts were broken. Their lives were literally uprooted and torn apart. Yet, Jeremiah reminded them, God

wanted them to go on again, to build new lives in the midst of this catastrophe which had befallen them. God wanted them, Jeremiah said, to believe the promises of God were still real and true, even though it seemed they weren't. God still loved them, even though they were no longer in their beloved Jerusalem. This marks a significant evolution in their understanding of God, who up until this point, they believed was anchored to them through the Temple in Jerusalem. In other words, they believed that they had left God behind in Jerusalem meaning they were totally on their own in this foreign land. No, Jeremiah said to them, over and over again. God is still right here with you, loving you, wanting the best for you, and expecting the best from you.

Our text this morning is one of Jeremiah's prophecies. "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." With these words Jeremiah is assuring the people that God hears their prayers and knows what they need in their moments of despair. "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." I know you need a strong new leader, God is telling them. I will send you someone, at the right time and place, and that person will be just like the greatest king you ever had – David. When that happens, "Jerusalem will live in safety."

A wonderful promise to these people beloved of God. And, how ironic that we are still waiting, thousands of years later, for Jerusalem to live in safety when the reason for Jerusalem's plight these days as a city torn by strife is rooted in its reality as a city sacred to three faiths. Unfortunately, Jeremiah's description of God's promise that Jerusalem will live in safety is still unrealized because of those same people beloved of God arguing about whose faith is correct in its teachings about God. Muslims, Jews and Christians in positions of power around the world are still arguing, in some cases literally fighting, about who has the right understanding of God and therefore the sole right to live in safety in Jerusalem. How messed up is that. God is still waiting to fulfill that promise of safety because God's own people aren't ready for it. They are too busy arguing, fighting, killing each other, over who has the right to claim the safety God promised for Jerusalem for themselves. Dear friends, that is the very definition of sin and its grip on all of us is still stronger than we ever want to admit.

Enter Advent. It is different from Lent. During Lent our spiritual work is to call to mind our sins in order to repent and begin all over again as a new person in the resurrection promise fulfilled on Easter. During Advent, however, our work is not to focus intentionally and intently on all the ways we fall short before God. Instead, during Advent we are invited to focus on all the ways God walks with us each day, offering us the gifts of hope,

peace, joy and love to guide us forward through the darkest day and the longest night. Advent, then is a gift of time intended to brighten our spirits and illuminate the way forward for us to relax into God's abiding love made tangible in new ways each day, if only we will remember to look for them.

So, dear friends, as the frenzied aspects of December crowd into your lives with ever more intensity as the days slip by, I urge you to pause to savor the light of God ever present in your lives just waiting for the moment to guide you forward through your life each day. I urge you to look for the light of God all around you, in the faces of people you encounter each day remembering as you do that you too carry that light of God within you. Does your face shine with God's light this time of year? Can you smile through yet another rainy day, through yet another shopping trip or doctor's visit? Will you rant at the string of lights that goes out on the Christmas tree after it's decorated OR laugh about it? Will you count the people you don't hear from this time of year OR will you celebrate the ones you do hear from? Will you look for God's promised gift of hope this holiday season OR will you miss it because it's been crowded out of your life by all the craziness the world layers on to this time of year? The choice is yours always, dear ones. God is waiting for you to decide. Amen.