“Unexpected Arrival”

Advent I

_Isiah 2:1-5; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44_

Part I of VII in series, “Living in the Moment”

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From the Pulpit
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A Baptismal Meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy Carl Ahrens, Senior Minister, First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio Advent I, November 27, 2016, dedicated to my daughter, Sarah Ruth Sitler Ahrens for her 21st Birthday, to Thomas Jeffrey Hardin on his baptismal day and always to the glory of God!

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

In the newly released film, “Arrival,” twelve huge extraterrestrial spacecraft appear across the Earth and hover just feet above the earth’s surface. Linguist Louise Banks is asked by the US Army to join a team to find out why they have come. What is their purpose in arriving in 12 seemingly random locations across the earth?

Accompanied by Ian, a theoretical physicist, Louise makes contact with two seven-limbed aliens, which they call
"heptapods." Ian nicknames them “Abbott and Costello.” Louise discovers that the aliens use a written language of complicated circular symbols. They begin to learn the symbols that correspond to a basic vocabulary. As Louise becomes more proficient in the language, she is able to ask what the aliens want, they answer: “to offer weapon.” Similar translations (“use weapon”) are deduced at other sites, leading other nations to close down communications, and some to scramble their military believing the message indicates a threat. However, Louise thinks that “weapon” might have an alternative translation such as – they want to offer a new “tool.” So begins the drama of the unexpected and brilliant “Arrival” based on Ted Chiang’s short story entitled, “Story of Your Life.”

In “Arrival” – as in life – future fate hangs on a few words that could be interpreted in different ways.

“Unexpected Arrival” could easily be the words we associate with our first Advent text today. “Weapons” are to be beaten into “new tools” as we are called by the Prophet Isaiah to see a vision that “shall come to pass.” His vision is for Judah and Jerusalem. He offers God’s word that in the nation and in the city on a hill, peace shall come to pass. Jerusalem shall become the place where swords are beaten plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, the place where nations shall no longer lift swords against nations and no one shall learn war, anymore.
A fantastical vision? Perhaps. But, perhaps it is the vision of the way God sees the world which God created in the first place.

We could use such a vision in our world – in our nation – today. Words would be used for healing not for destroying one another. Facebook fever and angst would turn to “friending” and not “unfriending” people. Actual weapons would be laid down and friendship and healthy relationships rather than terror and fear would become the measure of our society’s greatness.

The prophet’s words may seem like a dream to you. But not to me. As I have walked the streets of Jerusalem through the years and witnessed the intensity and power of feeling and faith the people there bring to their everyday existence, I have imagined that the coming of peace is needed and desired just as intensely by God as by God’s people. The problem is that each faith tradition cares so deeply about Jerusalem, that not one is willing to let go of it, and yet each faith tradition in its effort to possess and control Jerusalem, fails to hold the very gem which they can never truly possess.

Similarly, in our nation and our lives, that which we try to hold on to and possess, eludes us. Sometimes, we hold onto something so tight and seek to make it be the way we want it to be, or believe it “should be,” that we strangle in and smother it with our well-meaning intentions and our self-
pride. We discover, in so doing, that the “way things should be, can’t be.” They can never be the way we try to force them to be.

We can do this in our jobs. We can do it in our families. We can do it in relationships. We do it with our beliefs and our faith. We can do it here at First Church, with our church building and our church community and our idea of what it should be. Perhaps we hold onto a memory, or maybe it’s a belief system, or a life commandment (by this I mean “We have to follow this - or that - tradition.” – This is known as the seven last words of the church – ‘We’ve never done it that way before’), and then we seek with all our imagination to keep something the way we believe it is meant to be. But, truthfully, it never was “just that way.” It never can be and it never will be “just that way.” We do well, as we anticipate the unexpected arrival of the Messiah to begin to beat our swords into plowshares and our images of “how things are supposed to be” into the life as it is actually is or can be. Beauty and true possibilities for life and living become possible when we let go of our “shoulds” and embrace God’s “coulds.” That alone would mark an unexpected arrival in our hearts and minds.

In Matthew 24, we encounter another seemingly alien and unexpected arrival. A flood, a kidnapper, a disappeared farmer and housewife, and a thief in the night are sharp,
intrusive and disturbing images that bring in this new year of Christian faith and introduce our Advent season. That’s right.

Just when you thought it safe to bring friends and family to church for the holidays, the Gospel of Matthew opens up a full-frontal assault of warnings about being unprepared for Noah’s flood (the destructive flood of a lifetime), or the being suddenly kidnapped while working in field and mill, or being robbed while sleeping in your home by a break-in robber who takes all that you have! Again, what a way to welcome family and friends to church for the holidays.

Is it any wonder that people choose to stay away from church – moving to high ground, avoiding kidnap and protecting their homes filled with new Christmas gifts purchased just two days ago, many in the pre-dawn hours of “Black Friday?”

Our first Century ancestors of faith had a way with words. They wanted to be sure their cozy Christian cousins 2,000 years later wouldn’t miss the message of the coming of God! The Lord will come suddenly!

Be prepared!

Watch out!

Be awake!

Wait for God!
Our early forbearers in faith wanted us to know what they already knew – Christianity is filled with “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” of which Hamlet spoke in his famous soliloquy (William Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 1). And Advent is the season in which we are introduced most bluntly to these slings and arrows and their double-edged reality.

On the one side is the great, good news of the coming of God. On the other side is the cost of discipleship involved in welcoming and following Christ! We want good news with no cost. We want glory with no suffering. We want Christmas with no Advent. We want the baby with no pregnancy, labor or delivery. We even want a victory over Michigan with no last second field goal (made by the guy who has missed two chip shots already) and going all the way through a heart-stopping double overtime victory.

But – of course - it doesn’t work that way! The coming of God comes with a cost and in the full (and sometimes fearful) force of daily living.

The late, great German pastor, prophet, martyr and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer delivered these words in an Advent sermon on December 2, 1928, while preaching at 22 years old in his first parish in Barcelona, Spain. I share this long-ish quote (from a much longer sermon) because of the
brilliant understanding and insights the young Bonhoeffer brought (and still brings!) to faith and life in season of Advent.

“Celebrating Advent means learning how to wait. Waiting is an art which our impatient age has forgotten. The blessedness of waiting is lost on those who cannot wait and the fulfillment of promise is never theirs. They want quick answers to the deepest questions of life and miss the value of those times of anxious waiting, seeking with patient uncertainties until the answers come. They lose the moment when the answers are revealed in dazzling clarity.

Not all can wait – certainly not those who are satisfied, contented and feel that they live in the best of all possible worlds! Those who learn to wait are uneasy about their way of life, but yet have seen a vision of greatness in the world and in the future and are patiently expecting its fulfillment. The celebration of Advent is possible only to those who are troubled in soul, who know themselves to be poor and imperfect, and who are looking forward to something greater to come.

When early Christianity spoke of the return of the Lord Jesus, they thought of a great day of judgment. Even though this thought may appear to us to be so unlike Christmas, it is original Christianity and to be taken extremely seriously. ... Are we rightly prepared? Is our heart capable of becoming God’s dwelling place? Thus, Advent becomes a time of self-
examination…’Put the desires of your heart in order, O human beings!’ (Valeintin Thilo). It is very remarkable that we face the thought that God is coming so calmly, whereas previous people trembled at the day of God, whereas the world fell into trembling when Jesus Christ walked over the earth.

We have become so accustomed to the idea of divine love and of God’s (peaceful) coming at Christmas, that we no longer feel the shiver of fear that God’s coming should arouse in us. . . . The coming of God is truly not only glad tidings, but first of all frightening news for everyone who has a conscience.

Only when we have felt the terror of the matter, can we recognize the incomparable kindness. God comes into the very midst of evil and death, and judges the evil in us and in the world. And by judging us, God cleanses and sanctifies us, comes to us with grace and love.” (From A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, edited by Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson, Harper, San Francisco, 1995, pp. 185-186).

We need to see that “God judging us” is a good thing. God judging us is God’s righteousness alive and at work in the world. It is God’s judgment that cleanses and sanctifies, bringing love, grace and justice. It is God’s righteousness. It is God’s goodness delivered as Incarnate Word.
As we enter Advent, we are called to watch out for “righteousness.” We are called to live into righteousness. In the words of the early Biblical translator, William Tyndale, we are called to be “right wise,” or to be in the “right way.” We are called to prepare for the coming of God through “doing the right things” as people who are pleasing in the eyes of God.

If you are not sure what is “the right way” or how you do the right thing, I offer you the wisdom of young baptizand whom I prepared for the sacrament into which Thomas entered into this morning. He was a 7-year-old. I asked him what it meant to follow Jesus all the days of his life. He answered, “Don’t you know Rev. Tim? It means doing the right thing every day.” He truly grasped the way of righteousness. Prophets come in all sizes and in each generation!

There will be an unexpected arrival. Be aware. Be awake. Watch. Wait. Do the right thing every day. It may be frightening at first. But do not let fear hold you in its grip.

The Lord of Life is coming again in righteousness – an unexpected arrival. In God’s coming again, we will be given “new tools” to interpret what we thought we already knew. Be ready to receive them. Amen.