

“Worship Fully”

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

Part I of VI in the sermon series:
“The Advent Conspiracy”

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens
Senior Minister

November 29, 2015

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 • Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

An Advent meditation delivered by the Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister of the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Advent I, November 29, 2015, dedicated to all men, women and children living with HIV/AIDS and always to the glory of God!

“Worship Fully”

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

Part I of VI in the sermon series:

“The Advent Conspiracy”

+++++

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.

+++++

On this day when we are called to “worship fully” we start the season of Advent in the Temple of Jerusalem. There Jesus has the first word in the new year of Advent. He is preaching with fire. While people around him are all swept away by the beauty of the Temple, Jesus proclaims to his disciples to *“Be on Guard!”* On the eve of his trial before Pilate Jesus looks his disciples in the eyes and says, *“Get ready! ... Be alert at all times.”*

He is talking about the End of Time –The Day of Vengeance. *“Pay attention,”* he says. *“Don’t lose your edge by*

constantly drinking, partying and shopping! (We wonder... “How does Jesus know about our shopping issues? Was he watching us on Black Friday? Was he watching over our Michigan/ Ohio State Game Day parties?).

While we are pondering, he continues, *“Wake up from your drunken haze. It has gotten so bad, you have lost track of the seasons of the year. You don’t even know when the leaves of the fig tree are changing from winter to spring! And you don’t even know the gifts God has placed right before your eyes. Your senses are so dull you wouldn’t know it if it hit you in the head. Wake up!”*

There are so many questions about this text as we enter to “worship fully” on this First Sunday of Advent. For example, why do we hear Jesus’ voice first on the way to the manger to herald *his* birth? Our season of waiting begins, not in the wilderness with Isaiah’s cry, or with John the Baptist heralding the coming of Christ down by the riverside. Rather, it begins with Jesus in the Temple ranting about the last day on earth during his last days on earth.

We hear Jesus first because his voice matters most of all. This is the season of waiting. It is the season of paying attention. And waiting and paying attention can cause anxiety.

Jesus knew a thing or two about anxiety. He knew about **“anxious” waiting**. Whether waiting for the nails to

be driven through his hands or waiting for the coming of the kingdom of God, Jesus knew that waiting could feel very lonely, long and painful at times. He waited for God, his “Abba,” to answer his prayers. He waited for his disciples to figure out how and when they would really follow him. He waited for the children when they came to him while others were telling them to go away. He waited for the hurting and hopeful ones making their way to his healing hands in any way they knew how. Jesus knew how to wait.

Second, **Jesus also knew about “anxious” anticipation.** Jesus is warning people that they must be ready for the apocalypse. They must be ready for no less than the passing away of heaven and earth and all that we know as existence. In our end is our beginning. This is a real revelation, which is the true root of word “apocalypse.” In other words, Jesus is warning folks to have faith in God and actually see the world around them and appreciate the ones God has placed before their eyes.

In this way, the Day of Vengeance is actually a day of grace. Grace is not a free pass. It does not mean that you will face no adversity whatsoever. Grace means that when you enter into the high anxieties of your daily lives, you see things differently. You receive God in the midst of the struggle and distress.

Stepping into Advent by stepping into Luke 21:25-36 seems out of sorts with the image we have of Jesus. It feels like he is shouting at us. We struggle with “Loud Jesus.” We struggle with “Judging Jesus.” What happened to our gentle Jesus, our healing Jesus, our sweet Jesus, and for that matter – what happened to our “Baby Jesus?”

It feels a little like Sally, the quiet school crossing guard, who tenderly guides the children day in/day out, week in/week out, month in/month out, year in/ year out - then one day stands at her corner, waving her arms and flags screaming at kids and cars: **“STOP TEXTING AND TALKING ON YOUR PHONE! LOOK AROUND YOU! LISTEN TO EACH OTHER! TALK TO YOUR CHILDREN! PAY ATTENTION!”**

For that matter, it feels like the ghost of Jacob Marley returning from the dead in Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* to warn Ebenezer Scrooge that if he doesn’t change his ways he will spend eternity walking the earth in agony and unresolved pain and torture.

When someone does this, we usually call them crazy (or perhaps we account it as indigestion – as Scrooge does with Marley). I encourage us to change our viewpoint - we should call them prophets of God. We should say they woke us up just in time to see what we were missing - the

multitudes of gifts and blessings God has placed right in front of us.

Since “apocalypse” simply means “revelation,” instead of judging these texts harshly, I would like you to wake up and take a look at your life today. What moments have you been missing because you have been stuck in your own stuff? What gifts have been right in front of your eyes that you have been too dulled by anger or judgment or laziness to see? Look at your life. Look at your life and the life of those close to you and really see it as if for the first time.

Perhaps it is the gentle touch of someone reaching out to you. Perhaps it is the sun coming through the trees in your back yard. Perhaps it is the deep sorrow and sadness in **your parent’s eyes, your children’s eyes, or your neighbor’s eyes** that have escaped you. Or perhaps you have missed the love in their eyes for you and you only. Perhaps you have missed a word spoken in kindness, an action given in love **for you, or a smile offered when you were “lost in space.”**

Or perhaps you are so good at looking right in front of **you that you miss the bigger picture.** Perhaps you don’t see the beauty or the pain of the world all around you because of your focus on one thing right in front of you. Perhaps **you can’t dream dreams** or see visions because you only ever look at the bottom line.

Whatever your case, today and on through this Advent season, pay attention to the revelations of God appearing in 3-D and Technicolor every day all around you – which is no less than the kingdom of God breaking forth in your life! It is God's grace alive in your life! That is the Good News of this seemingly bad news Vengeance Day rant by Shouting Jesus.

But, wait, wait, there's more to grasp as we live and worship fully.... Enter Jeremiah the prophet. Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote of this prophet: *“Jeremiah's soul was in pain, stern with gloom. To his wistful eye, the city's walls seemed to reel. The days that were to come would be dreadful. He called, he urged his people to repent - and he failed. He screamed, wept, moaned - and was left with terror in his soul.”* (A.J. Heschel, *The Prophets*, Harper Collins, 1962, p. 105).

Jeremiah was called the weeping prophet and the prophet of wrath for a reason. For 50 years, he called the people to repent and turn from their ways of wickedness. In the end, he brought them a sprig of hope. Speaking for God, the prophet writes, *“Watch! The Time is coming when I will keep the promises I have made to the families of Israel and Judah. I will make a fresh and true shoot sprout from the Tree of David. He will run the country honestly and fairly. He will set things right.”* He will be a “Sprig growing out of our stuff.” A Sprig of Hope.

What does a sprig of hope look like?

In the midst of the AIDS Epidemic of the 1980's and early 90's in our country, it seemed like there was no hope for so many afflicted with HIV/AIDS. No treatment. No hope. It was in the early 90's that I met two men who were a sprig of hope; their names were Dan and Pat.

On a spring afternoon I received a call from Pat asking if I could hear him out before hanging up the phone. I said, "of course." He started telling me that Dan was in the final stages of AIDS. He wanted a pastor to come by and pray with Dan before he died. He had heard that I was "one pastor who would not judge him for being gay." I went that afternoon. Dan was close to death.

As I sat at Dan's bedside and heard their stories, I discovered two men who had been active in their church before they were cast out of the fellowship. They not only left church, they left their small towns. But they never left Jesus. They loved Jesus. They prayed to him daily. Nevertheless, these former Deacons in their churches were now churchless. Two men, for whom the church was the center of their universe, had experienced the apocalyptic judgment about which Jesus was talking – the blotting out of the sun, moon and stars in their lives. In the weeks that followed for Dan and the years that followed for Pat, I ministered to both men in life - and ultimately unto death.

Each man had come to the branch in their life's highway and even though the church had cut them off, out of the stump of their faith in Jesus, I witnessed a tiny shoot of hope growing. This little branch of hope grew because of redemption and the grace of Jesus which drew near to them. They returned to church. Dan died with the loving embrace of grace from the church. Pat became active in our fellowship and died a few years later – also embraced by grace.

On this World AIDS Sunday, the first Sunday of Advent, some of us have seen firsthand or lived firsthand through the devastating effects of living and dying with HIV/AIDS. Some of us remember - *in our bones* - what it feels like to be cut off by the church. But coming here to First Church, we have also claimed a new hope & now feel the shoot of hope & promise growing in our souls as we have been embraced by the grace of God, by the love of Jesus & even by the church.

If we are not accustomed to hearing Jesus shout about the end of time, we are also not conditioned to having the “prophet of wrath” proclaim hope. Granted, it is only a tiny little branch springing up from the tree of righteousness. But this sprig of hope is significant because the one who is coming IS the Messiah. He will bring justice and

righteousness to all the people. He will rule with fairness, equity and honesty. He will set all things right.

Breaking into this ordinary day of late November comes a word of hope. “The days are surely coming, says the Lord.” This is no less than the advent of God – after all, Advent means “coming.”

In Advent, every one of us should put down our iphones, and ipods, and headphones, our channel changers and email blasters and listen for the strains and not-so-distant sounds of a season waiting to be born. “Wake up!” Jesus screams from the Temple Mount! See the shoot of Jesse springing forth from freezing winter ground, the prophet Jeremiah cries to us.

I invite to **worship fully** in this Advent season. Moreover, please join in the Advent Conspiracy. Let’s start right now before it’s too late. Put down your service bulletins, your hymnals and all electronic devices to which to you cling so anxiously. Open your hands and close your eyes. Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in. Breathe out.

Please sing with me – “**Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me. Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me. Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me, Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.**” By breathing in the Spirit of God, we have

entered into the Advent Conspiracy. Come Lord Jesus.
Let us worship you fully, Amen

Copyright 2015, First Congregational Church, UCC