

November 28, 2021
The First Sunday of Advent, Year C
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Jeremiah 33:14-16
Psalm 25:1-9
1 Thessalonians 3:9-13
Luke 21:25-36

Three weeks ago we celebrated All Saints' Day. Part of the point of All Saints' Day is to remember that *we* are *all* saints, members of the Communion of Saints past, present, and yet-to-come. I wonder: what if we are also all *prophets*? What if *I* am a prophet? What if *you* are a prophet?

Let's think about what that might mean. First, to be clear, I'm not equating myself with the Prophet Jeremiah, but neither do I equate myself with the Saint Paul. I won't attain the status of a major saint; I won't attain the status of a major prophet. But that's not the point when it comes to saints, so it shouldn't be the point when it comes to prophets. Rather, each one of us is our own brand of saint, without further tests to pass or qualifications to achieve. Maybe being a prophet is like that; maybe we're already "in." If that's the case, and if we are all prophets, then the questions we should be asking are more like this: Does *knowing* that we are *prophets* affect how we relate to God? Does *knowing* that we are *prophets* affect how we relate to the world?

Dictionaries say that prophets are carriers of divine inspiration and spiritual insight.¹ Remember, prophets aren't fortunetellers. But they do connect the dots from the past to the present to the yet-to-come. We generally experience them also connecting the dots between individual suffering and societal structures. Surely you've heard that slogan of the political movements of the 1960s: the personal is political. From the prophetic worldview, you might say this instead: the *personal is political is spiritual*. And we might even reverse that: the *spiritual is political is personal*. Deep down, I think we know that, though sometimes we need a reminder. Today that reminder comes from the prophet Jeremiah.

We heard from Jeremiah today because it's the first Sunday of Advent. As the blurb near the top of your bulletin says, Advent is "a time of preparation and expectation for the coming celebration of our Lord's nativity, and for the final coming of Christ in power and glory."² Implicit in all this is the projection of Jesus back into Jeremiah. That is something to be aware of and resisted. We Christians need to be very careful about reading Jesus into any of the Hebrew Scriptures. Instead, we might take away from this lovely passage a message that is both timely and timeless. Jeremiah is speaking to the people of his day, in anticipation of immediate correction to the historical difficulty they occupy. At the same time, he is voicing the promise of God's salvation that plays on repeat to every people in every place at every time. God will bring justice to the land and safety to the people. The personal is political is spiritual; the spiritual is political is personal. God is coming. God is always coming.

Christians understand the coming of God as the coming of Christ. During the season of Advent, before we get to Christ's first coming, we hear about his second. The Gospel assigned for the first Sunday of Advent is always this bit of Luke, or, in rotating years, the near equivalent from Matthew or Mark. Two weeks ago we heard the lead-in to this, though the version from the Gospel of Mark. And last Sunday gave us a reading from the apocalypse of apocalypses, the Book of Revelation. Apocalyptic writing is a sort of prophetic writing that invokes the end of the world. Some Christians interpret that literally. Others of us hear it rhetorically, remembering that even apocalyptic is written in response to its historical situation. We hear it rhetorically, even while we wonder if the world is in fact coming to an end.

Despite its initiating gloom, many people including myself name Advent as their favorite season of the church year. On the surface, that's a bit odd, because both Advent and Lent are considered to be seasons of repentance and preparation. I don't know anyone who names Lent as their favorite season of the church year. But Advent and Lent are different. Lent is bound up with individual sin and by extension individual shame. It promises individual salvation, but of a sort that can feel hoarded. For so many of us, the God of Lent feels like a parent who would love us more if we were different than we are. We want and need that parent's love, but we sorely wish they were far less stingy with it.

Advent is different. Advent is less about punishing sin and more about soothing suffering. We remember that God wants God's creation to thrive. To that end, God seeks intimate relationship with God's creation. In other words, God seeks intimate relationship with us. It doesn't matter what we do or don't do. During Advent we are best advised to stop and wait and watch. If we're lucky, we are able to sense the God who seeks us. The word "repent" means literally "to turn." I think the turning of Advent is the turning toward the God who is love.

Our liturgical tradition almost singularly names God as "Father." If that's the only conception we have for God, then we are seriously underestimating God. We might widen the field a bit by adding in the occasional "Mother" or even the gender-neutral "Parent" This helps, but it still leaves us in the role of child. On the other hand, though it's less talked about, there is a long swath of Christian tradition that associates God not with *parental* but instead with *erotic* love. Rather than Parent, what happens if we reimagine God as spouse or lover? And if we can blast down that barrier, what happens if we reimagine God as something beyond even that? If we let ourselves reimagine God's relationship with us, we can't help but reimagine God's relationship with humanity. The personal is political is spiritual; the spiritual is political is personal. God is coming.

Most years during Advent I mention briefly my frustration with how hard it is to stay in Advent when our culture charges right on to Christmas. A recent story in *The New York Times* wondered whether, this year, Christmas had reached beyond Advent to overtake even Halloween.³ I cannot contend with such a force. And it is a force, not always for good. Advent is my favorite season of the church year, but, since I became a priest, I'm always so relieved when the holidays are over. Being a minister has given me an inside view of just how difficult the holiday season is for so many people. On January 1, I always let out a huge sigh of relief.

We can't stop the Christmas juggernaut. We might not even want to. The truth is, even I have already watched some Christmas movies. But maybe we can help maintain a both/and situation. *Both* Christmas is coming, *and* it's Advent. We can do it, because we're prophets. The personal is political is spiritual; the spiritual is political is personal. God is coming. Stop and wait and watch. God is always coming.

Notes

¹ "prophet," *Merriam-Webster*, available online at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prophet> (accessed November 28, 2021).

² "Advent," *An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church: A User-Friendly Reference for Episcopalians*, Don S. Armentrout and Robert Boak Slocum, editors), available online at <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/glossary/> (accessed November 28, 2021).

³ Alyson Kreuger, "Has the Christmas Shopping Season Overtaken Halloween?" *The New York Times*, October 30, 2021, available online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/30/style/christmas-shopping-early.html> (accessed November 28, 2021).