

öTroubled Timesö
Jeremiah 33: 14 ó 16 Luke 21: 25 ó 36
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Well, weöve made it to Advent again, the beginning of the Christmas Season? Isnö it wonderful to see the lights? Isnö it exciting to prepare for family gatherings, making luscious foods, anticipating looks of joy when presents are finally opened? This, of course, is the popular understanding of the season, but perhaps from a more spiritual perspective Advent can be seen as a time of preparation rather than simply as a time of anticipation.

In my Advent sermons this year, I will be trying to lift up an understanding of the Christmas message that is most consistent with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Through these sermons, we will look, first, at the nature of the troubled times experienced and foretold by Jesus. We will consider ways to understand his purpose in coming. And we will look at how the nature and depth of our preparation can affect our ability to capitalize on the abundant opportunities associated with the celebration of Christ coming into the world.

We cannot really appreciate the spiritual gifts of Christmas without a clear picture of what we are facing in life. I sure we can agree that we live in troubled times where evil seems to be breaking forth wherever we look. We must be very careful, though, how we use this word öevil.ö I would suggest that it does not serve us well if we simply identify people we donö like, or people who scare us, or people who are in some way different, as evil. In fact, designating individual people, groups, or countries as evil misses the point entirely.

Consider this alternate way of looking at the function of evil. What are the conditions that make our times so troubled? Is it that there are wars? We can hardly find times in history without them. Is it that terrorism is rampant? Terrorism has always been a part of human experience whenever one group has attempted to impose its will on another through force or intimidation. Is it that diseases or natural disasters run rampant throughout the world? Disease and destruction are not new. So if evil is not about people, war, diseases, or even earthquakes, then how else might we understand it?

Try this. Evil is what tempts us to try to be other than human. Evil is what distracts us from the essence of our creation. Evil is what leads us away from our awareness of creation as an expression of divine love and away from taking responsibility as participants in that creation. We might say that evil is the process of spreading the many lies that accomplish the above. I will not try to say that our times are any better or worse than any other times or have any greater presence of evil (although, because of the weaponry available to us, we are capable of being more destructive). I will simply say that we live in troubled times and it is our responsibility to figure out how to live faithfully and creatively in them.

One of the ways to challenge evil is by identifying the truth and exposing lies. Jesus came so that we might know the truth and be set free. So, what are the lies we can address that belong to this age? It is these lies that create the greatest trouble for us. Dispelling these lies is one way to look at Jesus purpose.

Ed Friedman, Rabbi, Pastoral Counselor and Marriage and Family Therapist, identifies three primary temptations that lead to evil outcomes. I have come to believe that these are the foundation for many of the lies. They have to do with power, knowledge, and death.

By the way, these temptations are usually attempts to make things better as quickly as possible. It's just that they can't deliver what they promise. Friedman reminds us that omnipotence, omniscience, and timelessness are characteristics that historically have been ascribed to the divine, not to humans. The basic truth about humanity has three parts: human beings are unique; human beings are created in the Divine image; but because we are not gods, we get into and cause immense amounts of trouble when we believe that we should be or even can be as gods.

It is easy to argue that most wars and other destructive conflicts often result from variations on these temptations. For example, some destructive behaviors spring from arguments about doctrine or philosophy, in short, over who is right. Once we recognize the human limitations to what we can know for sure, then other ways of knowing can be illuminating rather than challenging. However, if we believe that we can know in the same way that God knows, then we will have to fight to defend our version of how things are or even to defend who we believe God to be. We don't have to look very far in government, business, or religious institutions to find many examples of such destructive behavior.

Another springboard for destructive conflict is power. Our world operates on the belief that having enough power is the solution to all our fears and insecurities. Power is accumulated and gets expressed in terms of money, status, influence, property, and weapons. Our present system has idolized money, making it into a practical God. Many social ills are perpetrated when the promise of money causes us to make short term decisions with long term consequences. Using any of these forms of power as a response to human fear and insecurity can cause us to identify other people, other groups, or other faiths as the enemy. Then, because evil always works this way, we can find ourselves emulating the very people and groups we have identified as evil, believing and behaving just like those we hate. If we look at the behavior and stances of many of the world's political and religious leaders, we can readily observe this temptation in action. It is obviously a very difficult temptation to resist. The upshot of this dynamic of trying to have power over others as a way to feel less afraid and more secure is that the fabric of community is weakened. Instead of people discovering what unites them, that is, what is in their common interest, they fight. I would suggest to you that much more security and serenity can be generated by healthy community than by any amount of power.

The third temptation has to do with immortality or time. Even if we know we cannot live forever, we try to create institutions or ideas that will last for a very long time. Instead of being able to appreciate the wonders of the moment, perhaps in community, we worry about how long the moment will last. In other words, we worry about losing the pleasurable characteristics of the moment rather than simply enjoying it. There is a terrible prejudice in our world towards anything that does not last. A number of years ago now, my wife and I lost a child very late in the pregnancy. Even though that little boy never saw the light of day, we were still profoundly blessed through the impact he had on our lives. With regard to Jesus, we could say that he left the earth too soon. If only he could have ministered and taught for more than three years, we

might not have such troubles now. Of course, we have no way of knowing. All we know is that he was here on earth for a short time and has had an extraordinary effect on humanity.

Another example of this third temptation is the religious obsession with eternal life. Some say that life cannot really matter unless we have the Christian guarantee that it will last forever, and that we will be in heaven for all that time. As a result, we miss the opportunities to appreciate and take care of our earth.

During this Advent season, we have the opportunity to affirm our humanity, so that we can value how much we learn from each other and from the experiences of life. We do not have to know it all. We can learn to value vulnerability because it makes intimacy and satisfying relationships possible. And we can learn to value our mortality. Nothing else can motivate us to appreciate the wonders of the present more than knowing we do not have an infinite supply of days.

Advent is a time to prepare for the coming of hope, joy, and new possibility into the world. It is a time to remind ourselves that although we are finite humans, living in troubled times, we are not alone. Emmanuel, God-with-Us, is born anew.