

"The Gift of the Tree: Prediction"

Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-31

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

November 29, 2015 – 1st Sunday of Advent – Rev. Ronald Botts

Trees are frequently used as symbols in the scriptures. Often they illustrate a teaching by tying it to something familiar from the world of nature. Over time trees have also become a central element in our celebration of Christmas. It's hard for us in America to think of Christ's birth without the evergreen, though Palestine is far from the great forests of firs and spruce and hemlock.

Trees also figure prominently in the scripture readings for Advent, and so you will find that they provide a common theme this year for my sermons leading up to Christmas. The keyword today is "prediction," with the following weeks being linked to the words "production," "purpose," and "promise."

Trees are actually a lot like human beings. For example, a tree eats. Its roots are always on the hunt for necessary elements like nitrogen, calcium, phosphorus, and magnesium. A tree drinks. Water is needed to carry the nutrients from the soil up through the trunk and into its branches. A tree breathes. Like all living matter, it requires air. Supplies of oxygen and carbon dioxide are vital to the manufacture of food.

A tree reproduces. It is capable of creating its own family. Many seeds have wings or are so light that they are carried away on the wind from the parent tree. Where they land they produce new generations. And, finally, a tree sleeps. In the winter months when the growing processes slow down, these large plants are getting their rest. They are saving up their energy for later when it'll be needed again in the cycle of life.

It is this resting stage that Jesus alludes to in today's Gospel reading. In the little parable contained here, he draws a contrast from the present time to the tree's eventual awakening in the spring. "Observe the fig tree, or any other," says Jesus. "Once it puts out its foliage, you can see for yourselves that summer is at hand." He then lifts up his intended parallel. "So that when you see the coming of the Son of Man, you ought to realize that the kingdom of God is now at hand."

In a sense it might seem strange that a prediction like this, coming near the end of Jesus' life, is used liturgically when his birth is anticipated. But then Christianity is full of such seeming contradictions and reversals. Ends are beginnings. Conclusions are initiations. Stopping places are starting points.

From reading the gospels it is clear that Jesus identified his own life with ushering in God's kingdom. This was an introduction that would later mark God's complete rule on earth. Jesus' life was to be a demarcation between the old and the new, between the former and the latter. Things were starting now that would eventually culminate in a total shift of the cosmic balance of life.

Jesus advised the people to read the signs of the times. See what is so obviously happening. Be alert and observant. No one can miss what occurs in spring when the trees blossom out. It is a harbinger of what is to follow in the days ahead. Even the dullest person can't fail to see what is so evident. Why then, he wonders, do so many fail to see what should be clear in God's intention for people? The clouds and the winds give us clue as to what tomorrow's weather will bring, but men and women are not nearly as astute in understanding God's revelation.

Advent annually challenges us anew to be alert to what occurred in the person of Jesus, and what is happening right here, right now. Advent is a time to watch and wait; it is a time for growth and renewal. Advent is a time of expectations and new awareness.

Someone once said that December is a month of tarnished dreams. The new year begins brightly with the hope found in January. People feel encouraged as they look ahead at the twelve months spread out before them. But then they find themselves becoming disillusioned as, one by one, many of their cherished dreams become dashed.

Businesses struggle and sometimes fail. Marriages end. Loved ones are buried. Children rebel at parents, and parents give up on their children. Illnesses take their toll. Opportunities are lost. Decisions, that once seemed right, are now questioned.

Perhaps that's why Advent is so needed where it comes at the end of the year. It reminds us that our hope is often misplaced. Happiness is so often tied to those things which are the most unpredictable and out of our control. Advent reminds us that, no matter what, God still embraces us in love and that this lifts us over the many broken dreams which now lie at our feet. In Advent life really starts anew for those who see the potential it brings.

The world often misses this good news, just as it once saw a tiny baby and doubted that God's plan and purpose could really be contained in a form so small. Many today still don't know the Messiah for who he is, and we can see ready evidence of that in all the needless pain and suffering about us. Bringing others to this gift, this awareness, is the continuing work entrusted to us. We have a message to proclaim, both through word and deed, and given us in sacred trust.

Jesse Stuart is a favorite author of mine. He was a teacher and farmer in Greenup, Kentucky. An educated man of the hills, he had the practical eye and insight of one who lived close to the land. I particularly like this observation of his:

"When I have sown clover on a cold snow in December over fields I planned to pasture, I never had any doubt that these seeds would reach the earth as soon as the snow melted. I sowed them on snow because I could see how many of the tiny seeds I was sowing. And I knew, when the snow melted, that the seeds dropped down to the soft, warm earth and sank therein and that the late winter rains fell and buried them and that in middle March or early April, when the warm suns and rains came, these seeds sprouted and grew."

Stuart continues: "So, too, what God plants in the cold December snows of Christmas, often on people with coldness of heart, will sprout, bud, and blossom later on, just as surely as spring resurrection follows the fallow of winter, and Easter follows Christmas."

You see our problem is that we say that these weeks leading up to Christmas are a time of expectation, but we don't act on that assertion. More often than not, we don't really expect to make any new discoveries, come to any new insights, or find any new meaning during this period. The trouble isn't in what God provides, but what we are ready and willing to receive.

Some of our difficulty stems from being creatures of habit. That serves us well in many ways, so that we don't have to stop and think out each repetitive situation in life. Instead, we have a strategy that has mostly proven itself to our satisfaction.

For example, I have a set route I take from home to the church. It involves six streets and about fifteen miles on Interstate 270. If I didn't have this already predetermined, I would have to plot my travel path each and every trip. That would take time and energy which I don't want to expend.

Through past experience and repetition my path is largely habit. I can simply pullout of my driveway and a half-hour later get here without much conscious thought. My mind is freed up for other matters. And we develop similar automatic patterns in dozens of our daily activities. It's a great effort saver. Habitual behavior attempts to flatten out life to the predictable and the same.

So when the Advent watch word is "expectation" and the key action is "Be alert," we find that they have to struggle against our natural inclinations. We have to be intentional to override our automatic systems that tend to reject the new and the untried.

The other problem in following what Jesus said is that we often lack the trust to believe that something good is about to happen. We have grown to fear the future. We don't even want to turn on the evening news. Yet, the central message of Advent is that something new is now breaking upon the world, and it is coming into our personal life as well.

God's spirit working through us can bring great joy and fulfillment; but, first of all, we must trust the promise. Only when our hearts are truly open can that be possible. We must trust the promise; even more, we must trust the giver of this assurance.

As the budding of the leaves in spring show us that summer is soon at hand, so do signs from God show us the old is passing away and a future hope is upon us, even now. So be alert. Be ready. And then don't be hesitant to respond.