

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Advent is the season of anticipation. I have loved this season since I was a child, when my father would make his own Advent candles (before pillar candles were easily available) and a wreath from fresh greens cut from trees in our yard, and we would eat our Sunday dinners in the dining room, where we never ate unless we had company. We would light those candles, one each week, until it was Christmas. It was a special time. Of course, as a child, the main thing about Advent was that it led to Christmas and, especially, Christmas presents. And in my family we got to have two present-opening sessions, one on Christmas Eve at my Father's parents' house, and one on Christmas Day at my mother's parent's house, each about a half hour away in different directions. But there was more than that. Christmas also meant a week off of school, and it often involved the visit of my parents' very good friends from Indiana, who had children the age of my sisters and me. We would all pile into my parents' house for three or four days around New Year's, which always included having our own version of a New Year's Eve party in the playroom of our house, just off the living room where the adults had their party. Looking forward to all of this was a large part of the charm of Advent for me.

I have not often appreciated that that kind of anticipation is what our readings are actually pointing us to on the first Sunday of Advent. Honestly, in my years as a parish pastor I have mostly been annoyed at having yet another apocalyptic Gospel reading after several weeks of the same at the end of the previous church year, and have I have tended to focus on how the liturgical year wraps around on itself and prepares to take us once again through the major events of Jesus' incarnation, life, death, and resurrection. But it is the three readings taken together that give us this more expanded sense of the beginning of the new church year.

Our second reading from 1 Thessalonians reflects exactly the kind of Advent anticipation I remember from my childhood. Paul is here writing to members of a community that he helped to form, and is hoping to return to them. The focus of the first Sunday of Advent is always Jesus's return, and about anticipating that as a good thing, an expected thing, a hoped-for thing. I don't want to suggest any comparison with the apostle Paul or the church at Thessalonica, but on Friday morning I spent a couple of hours on a Zoom call with two former students from the Russian seminary I taught at for four years twenty years ago. One of them is now the rector of the seminary, and the other is the archbishop of the Lutheran Church in Russia. The third person on the call was my successor, and American who ended up marrying a Russian and who has lived there ever since. The call was on behalf of an endowment created to help fund Lutheran theological education in Russia that I serve on the board of. Our goal was to find out how things are going there so that we can relay the news to our contributors. But it has also been Helen and my long-term goal to return to Russia in our retirement, and we spoke briefly about that possibility during this meeting. They know it won't be soon, but as I get closer to retirement age it becomes more imaginable – something to anticipate.

Our Gospel reading tempers that anticipation to some extent. Jesus' anticipated return will happen only in the wake of disaster, and the immediate disaster experienced by the Christian community that Luke was writing to was the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. It was their 9/11, only much more so. The reality of the Lutheran churches in Russia has never been simple or easy, and at times it has been downright apocalyptic. After the Bolshevik revolution in 1917, all churches were persecuted. Their buildings were seized by the government and put to all different

sorts of uses. The main Lutheran church in St. Petersburg, for example, was converted into a public swimming pool. Another Lutheran church in the main German suburb was turned into a training school for truck mechanics. But even more devastating to the Russian Lutheran church was the imprisonment or assassination of all of its pastors by the mid 1930s. These are things we have difficulty imaging or connecting to our own lives. Yet I remember a visit to a Lutheran church on the Volga River where many German Lutherans settled in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, where I met an old woman, a member of one of the congregations there, who had the same last name as me. It's not a common last name. It was an eye-opening encounter, because whether or not we are distantly related (and we could well be), both of our families emigrated from Germany in search of a better life – hers to Russia, mine to the United States. Her family had to live through terrible persecution, mine did not. Mine eventually became part of the main stream of American society. Her church suffered terribly. My church did not. And yet her church survived on the strength of private devotions, secret meetings, and Grandmothers teaching grandchildren the faith, trusting beyond all hope that one day God's promises would be fulfilled.

And that is also the assurance we find in our first reading this morning from Jeremiah. "The days are surely coming," writes Jeremiah, when God's promises will be fulfilled, when "Jerusalem will live in safety." Jeremiah was writing those hopeful words to a community that was also experiencing disaster. They were living through the first time Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed by the Babylonians, some 650 years the Roman sequel. To the people of Jeremiah's time, many of whom were sent into exile in Babylon, and maybe also to the people of Luke's time, who surely knew Jeremiah's writing, these words must have seemed like fantasy, a childish dream. There was nothing in their experience of reality that even hinted that there were better days ahead, that there was anything to hope for. And yet the promise was made, and some of them trusted it, against all evidence to the contrary.

I'm not in the business of predicting the future. I pay attention to current events the same as you. I hear the dire warnings about climate disaster, about the rise of populism and totalitarianism around the world, and about the fragility of democracy in our own country. I'm reading about the ecological pressure of overpopulation and about yet another new strain of the COVID virus. Disasters loom everywhere you look. Will any of them come to pass? I don't know. I pray that they don't. "Save us from the time of trial," we say every time we pray the Lord's Prayer.

The takeaway from today's texts and the point of the first Sunday of Advent is first that we are in need of God's salvation, second that God promises to save us, and third that our redemption is near. Jesus was sent to us in the first place because we were in dire need of him. And two thousand years later are still in dire need of him. But God has not been idle in the meantime, just as God was not idle before Jesus' birth. Nor is God not idle today. The Russian church has a lot to teach us on this count. They have lived through impossibly difficult times holding on to God's promise, trusting that God was working among them, and they have emerged into less difficult times – less difficult, but still challenging. The response to difficult and challenging times is to remember, repeat, and trust the promise that God has not given up on us, and so we do not need to give up on ourselves either. We can instead find creative and faithful ways to live into God's future as agents and partners of God's persistent love, to see the crises that inevitably arise as occasions for despair but opportunities to care for one another and the world God loves, confident that that care will not be in vain. Take heart, sisters and brothers in Christ. Our redemption is near. May we anticipate that with confidence. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.