

JUST FOLLOW THE SIGNS
November 29, 2009
Advent 1C

Texts: *Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36*

Approximately 50 miles east of Rapid City, South Dakota, and 8 miles north of the Badlands, there is a little town called Wall. It is a town of somewhere around 800 people; yet it is known to be visited by around 20,000 visitors a day. What is the attraction? The main, and perhaps only, attraction is Wall Drugs which includes a 520 seat café, Western art gallery and sells merchandise ranging from quality items to junk.

The amazing thing to me about Wall Drugs is not the experience that you have when you get there, but rather the experience you have on the way there. There are over 500 billboards stretched out along the I-90 interstate promoting Wall Drugs. From the east I think they begin somewhere just past the Dells. One-by-one these billboards announce how many miles to go to Wall Drugs and what you might obtain while there. These billboards have a way of filling you with expectation and anticipation. They make you think that this is an experience you simply cannot pass up.

This experience to me is a lot like the experience of Advent. For four Sundays, we are filled with the expectation and anticipation of Christmas. We are invited through our lessons to pay attention to Christ's presence in our lives. The themes of advent are designed to help us get ready for an experience that we simply cannot pass – the celebration of the birth of the Christ Child.

As a pastor and preacher and as a participant in the planning of worship, I sometimes struggle with Advent. I am fully aware that everything around us shouts of Christmas. Our neighborhoods come alive with Christmas displays and lights. Our radio stations play Christmas music and television stations offer a variety of Christmas specials. Shopping centers invite us to come in droves in search of those special holiday gifts at discounted prices. As each week in Advent passes, we find ourselves invited by friends and colleagues a growing list of Christmas dinners and parties.

And here in the church, well, we are not so quick to jump on the Christmas bandwagon. Our preparations for Christmas take us through the four Sundays of Advent. We hold off as long as possible before bringing Christmas fully into our worship space. And that typically involves holding off on singing Christmas carols in favor of Advent hymns. And what dreary hymns they can be: "Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending", "Wake, Awake, for Night is Flying", "On Jordan's Bank's the Baptists Cry". And who can forget that hymn from the With One Voice Hymnal that contains these Advent words:

*Each winter as the year grows older, we each grow older, too.
The chill sets in a little colder; the verities we knew seem shaken and untrue.*

So it really doesn't seem fair that outside these doors we see Christmas busting out all over, but in here we take a journey through Advent. And some of you may ask, "Why"? The simplest answer is this, to truly understand Christmas, to understand why the birth of the Christ Child is important to us as people of faith, we need to understand its context. And by context, I mean the world, long ago, into which the Christ Child was born, as well as the world in which we celebrate that birth today.

Our lessons for today help us begin to understand the context of the biblical world into which Christ was born. Our passage from Jeremiah begins with the words, "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah." And when those days arrive, says the prophet Jeremiah we will see one from the house of David rise up and usher in a time of justice and righteousness. When that day arrives, all will live in safety. And the name by which you will know that this promise has been fulfilled, says the prophet, is the one called "The Lord is our righteousness."

To whom are these words spoken? These are spoken to the people of Judah and Israel, who have experienced God's judgment and suffered under the oppression of unjust rulers and nations. They have been punished for forgetting the covenant God made with them. This punishment led to the near extinction of ancient Israel and her people, the result of invading armies. But just when it seemed that all hope was lost, that the covenant with God is completely broken, God speaks through the Prophet Jeremiah, saying, "I have not forgotten". Not only have I not forgotten, says the Lord, I will fulfill the terms of my promise." I will send a righteous one from the house of David who will come to restore and era of justice, righteousness and peace.

As Christians, we interpret this promise made through Jeremiah to be the promise of Christ. Jesus is the righteous one. Jesus is the one who comes to create a new covenantal relationship with God's people. Jesus is the one who comes to usher in an era of justice, righteousness and peace.

Our Gospel text is set in another context. In this case, the Christ Child has already come into the world. Jesus has already begun to set in motion the events that would occur in fulfillment of the Old Testament promise. Not only does Jesus come to fulfill the promise God made with the people of Israel, or the Jews in the time of Jesus; but that promise is extended to all of God's creation. All that God intended to do in order to fulfill his covenantal promises and establish justice, righteousness and peace in the world is accomplished in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

But here in the words of Luke, we anticipate what will happen after Jesus has left this earth. The world will reject the promises of Jesus Christ. The powers of this earth who are most threatened by this promise will rise up and fight against it. They will do everything in their power to destroy the hope that the followers of Jesus Christ have in the promises of God. Their evil actions will make the lives of the followers of Jesus so miserable that they will begin to doubt, once again, God's promises. So Luke provides

with a series of statements that are intended to bring hope and comfort to those who doubt the power and promises of God.

The first comes as an apocalyptic vision. So often the focus is on the statement of signs at the beginning of this passage. But the most important part of this gospel is in the statements of hope that follow: “they (the evil powers) will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.” When this happens, the faithful are encouraged to “stand up, raise you heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

That passage is followed by a parable of budding trees. Just as a sign of summer can be found when you look at a branch of a tree and see buds coming forth, so it is with the kingdom of God. There will be signs that will let you know that the Kingdom of God is near.

And so confident is the author that the signs will be there, that Jesus warns his followers to remain alert, look for the signs that the kingdom of God is near. Do not be so preoccupied or consumed by other things and other anxieties that you fail to see the kingdom in your midst.

We do not know exactly what Jesus means by these words, or what the author of Luke is trying to tell us by including this passage in his Gospel. What we do know is that we are inheritors of the promise. Our faith in Jesus Christ ushers us into a new covenant with God. And seeing through the eyes of this new covenant we are able to overcome whatever experiences of darkness or distress come our way. When we are surrounded by the evil of this world, and when we are weighed down by the cares and anxiety of this world, we know that we can lift up our heads and see the signs of the kingdom of God breaking into our lives all around us.

Whenever and wherever we come together in the name of Jesus Christ, we open ourselves to the signs of the kingdom. The signs are there in the waters of baptism and in the bread and wine of communion. The signs are there in the word spoken and preached. The signs are there in prayers that are offered, acts of kindness shared, and words of comfort spoken in times of loss.

This is what Advent is all about. While it is easy to be blinded by all the glitter and glitz of Christmas all around us, much of which has nothing really to do with the true meaning of Christmas, we take time here to wait and watch, staying alert for the signs of the Kingdom of God in our midst. We remind ourselves for a few weeks, of just how much this world needs to hear the words of God’s promises and hope. And as we wait and watch we begin to notice see the signs that the kingdom of God is breaking into our world each and every day.