

Sermon: The Days are Surely Coming

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St Giles PC, Nov. 28, 2021, 1st Advent)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Back in my mid-twenties, somehow that feels like quite a long time ago, I used to work on the commodity trading floor of the Montreal Exchange. It was a highly stressful, highly entertaining, and highly profitable working environment, with a group of mostly guys, trading commodity futures in open outcry pits. When the pits were busy, it was a sight to behold, with guys in brightly coloured jackets, waving highly technical hand signals, and shouting out buy or sell orders, handling millions of dollar worth of transactions. When the pits were not so busy, the guys kept themselves alert by taunting one another, calling each other out, all for good fun of course.

Timmy was a trader known for his mental dexterity, able to calculate in his mind instantly, complex addition and subtraction. So from time to time, someone would call out, “How many days until Christmas, Timmy?” You could see him doing mental gymnastic for a brief second...25 plus 31 plus 30 plus 18... “104 days until Christmas”, he would shout back almost immediately and take a bow to a round of applause. And even now, whenever the season of Advent approaches, I always recall Timmy’s speciality—counting the days until Christmas.

Yet, is that what Advent really means to us? Just counting the days until Christmas...let me see from today...4 plus 25 = 29 days! Surely not! For Jeremiah the prophet proclaimed, in chapter 33:14, “*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.*”

Jeremiah prophesied in the context of the waning days of the southern kingdom of Judah. The northern kingdom of Israel had already been overrun by the Assyrians, about 130 years earlier. Now the even more menacing Babylonians under the even more powerful Nebuchadnezzar was camping outside of Jerusalem. With dwindling resources, food, and able-body fighting men, Jeremiah offered no words of deliverance, no hope of imminent salvation.

Unlike Isaiah many years ago, who counselled King Hezekiah to trust in the Lord and to keep on fighting in an much earlier siege of the city, Jeremiah essentially told Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, to simply give up. In the midst of the prophet's weeping and laments, Jeremiah also offered these words of the Lord, *"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. In those days at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land."*

That promise to the house of David was vividly foretold by Isaiah, in chapter 11:1, that "a shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots." It should be noted that the term 'branch' used in Isaiah is נֹצֵר (nay'-tser), and the term 'Branch' used in Jeremiah is צֶמַח (tseh'-makh). The Isaiah's usage of 'branch' is mainly concerned with growth, with sprouting, illustrating something that grows mightily from a humble beginning. The Jeremiah use of the 'Branch' is actually a highly technical term, referring to a rightful heir of an established dynasty.

Both usages are appropriate in describing the coming Messiah, who comes rightfully as heir to the line of David, who comes righteously as the Son of the righteous God. Who will sprout from a humble beginning, almost unnoticeable by kings and rulers of the day, but who will grow from that humble beginning into a mighty tree that will offer rest for birds of the air, and will offer shade for creatures of the earth. And *"in those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness" (Jeremiah 33:16)*

Jeremiah's descriptions of the coming Messiah is varied and mostly unique. He pictures the coming Messiah as "the spring of living water" (2:13), as "the good shepherd" (23:4; 31:10), as agent of "the new covenant" (31:31-34), as "the Redeemer" (50:34); as "David their king" (30:9), and as the "Lord our Righteousness" (23:6; 33:16)

Our focus today is on that last description: "the Lord our Righteousness". I think the experience of Martin Luther, the pioneer of the Protestant movement, is helpful to us.

Luther was raised and trained as a Roman Catholic monk. In his dutiful exploration of the writings of St. Paul, particularly in the epistles to the Romans and the Galatians, and also that of the book of Hebrews, Luther was deeply disturbed by the phrase: "the righteousness of God".

He was taught to understand that righteousness in a philosophically active sense that God is righteous, and punishes unrighteous sinners. Listen to what Luther wrote, in 1545, *“Although I lived an irreproachable life as a monk, I felt that I was a sinner with an uneasy conscience before God; nor was I able to believe that I had pleased him with my satisfaction. I did not love (in fact, I hated) that righteous God who punished sinners, if not with silent blasphemy, then certainly with great murmuring. I was angry with God, saying “As if it were not enough that miserable sinners should be eternally damned through original sin, with all kinds of misfortunes laid upon them by the Old Testament law, and yet God adds sorrow upon sorrow through the gospel, and even brings wrath and righteousness to bear through it!” Thus I drove myself mad, with desperate disturbed conscience, persistently pounding upon Paul in this passage, thirsting most ardently to know what he meant.”*

The turning point for Luther, as most scholars would call it “the tower experience” as in happened up high in a tower of the Black Cloister in Wittenberg during a stormy night. The turning point was Luther’s own re-interpretation of the repeated passage “the righteous shall live by faith” (as in Roman 1:17; Galatian 3:11; and Hebrews 10:38).

Somehow, by God’s mercy, his heart was strangely warmed, and Luther came to understand that “righteousness of God” as that by which the righteous lives by the gift of God, namely by faith. It is a passive righteousness, by which the merciful God justifies us by faith, so the righteous shall live by faith. Luther wrote, *“This immediately made me feel as though I had been born again, and as though I had entered through open gates into paradise itself.”*

After which, Luther combed through the Scripture and found the same passive analogy in other phrases such as the “work of God” (that which God works within us), the “power of God” (by which God makes us strong), the “wisdom of God” (by which God makes us wise), then the “strength of God”, the “salvation of God” and the “glory of God”.

Alleluia, the Lord is our righteousness, and praise be to God! And so Jesus Christ came into the world, fulfilling that promise of God. He came some two thousand years ago, and among his many teachings, Jesus said, *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”* (Matthew 5:6)

I count myself fortunate that I have yet to experience food insecurity,

other than the few times that I fasted and prayed, I had never really known what real and prolonged hunger or thirst feels. I have heard stories from older generation of Taiwanese, of their experience during WWII. How food was always scarce, never enough. How my parents' generation had gotten used to greet each other, not with 'how are you?', or 'how do you do?', but with a most curious phrase in Taiwanese 'ja ba a boa', which literally means 'have you eaten enough?'

I may not have known hunger or thirst, but I think Jesus knows. He knows of the ravage of food deprivation, but Jesus knows also how much more terrible it would be to experience the absence of God—the absence of meaning, the absence of purpose, the absence of being connected to the source of all things good.

So he blessed those who earnestly seek God, seeking God's righteousness in this unjust world. He assures us that those who truly hunger and thirst for the righteousness of God, will be filled. That, my friends, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, is the true meaning of the season of Advent, on this 1st Sunday of Advent, the Advent of Hope.

We are counting days, and the days are surely coming. The days will come in that one final day, the Day of the Lord. As Jesus himself counsels and assures us, in Luke 21:35-36, "*For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.*"

Not cowering in fear, but to stand firm, to stand proud, and to stand strong before the coming of the Lord.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.