

# Sermons at Saint Paul's

*Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World*

The First Sunday of Advent/November 29, 2015

The Reverend E. Clifford Cutler

“The days are surely coming, says the Lord,” in Jeremiah. Jesus remarks, “Heaven and earth will pass away.” The scriptures today have us coming and going. That is a phrase that has multiple meanings. It expresses confusion. I don't know whether I am coming or going. Jesus reminds us not to let our hearts be weighed down by the worries of this life. Am I coming or going is a question that expresses our worry that we might not be going anywhere at all. When we get caught up in busyness it sometimes seems that we meet ourselves coming and going. Or especially this weekend holiday sales come and go. We better get to the store right now before the sale ends. Coming and going can express a frantic urgency. At the turn of the secular year we have the image of the little baby coming and the bent-over ancient of days going. I guess you could say we're all coming and going.

Jeremiah reflects upon the coming days after the desolation wrought by the Babylonians. The coming of God's promise can only be seen after our human ability to succeed on our own goes awry. Jerusalem is emptied by the Babylonian exile before the people can return and rebuild. Luke's gospel is written after another time of going to pieces, the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans during the Jewish War of 70 CE. The memory remains very vivid to the gospel writer. It was earth-shattering. People would faint from fear, the gospel says. It resembles nothing so much as a going back to primordial chaos. All that was known and familiar is going away. It seems as though the very powers of heaven are shaken.

There are places in the world today where the experience is very much like this. One thinks of the destruction in Syria from which refugees are fleeing. But all of us know what it is like to suffer loss. We have had turning points

where things will never be the same again. Sometimes there are breakdowns. Those times may be the bottom land upon which new lives are built. Thomas Moore who is not a psychologist, rather a scholar of religious studies, makes an interesting observation that depression is an emotional clearing of ground for new construction. That may be. The going of what was before seems to be necessary for the coming of a new day.

We can see Jeremiah straining forward to see what is coming, the promise that endures through times of emptiness and loss. Salvation and safety will come to Judah and Jerusalem. The promise through all our coming and going is that God is present. Perhaps we recall the words of Psalm 121, a song of trust: “The Lord shall preserve thy going out, and thy coming in, from this time forth for evermore.” Coming and going God watches over us. Though heaven and earth pass away, Jesus says, my words will remain. Jesus’ words are of redemption and healing, the restoration of all things. Jesus comes into the world as a child to give this message. We come into the world as well. It is worth considering what message we have come to give. The world needs it to be a message of consolation, not desolation. Then, from the Christ-child coming into the world, Jesus turns to the Book of Daniel and switches the image. Daniel sees one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven, and he came to the Ancient of Days. Jesus says this of himself. He is coming from earth to heaven, exalted in glory, we say, at the right hand of the Father. This means the enemies of God’s people are already defeated, and God’s people themselves are vindicated. The durable message is that “your redemption is drawing near.” On that we can rely.

The motivating power of Christian living is faith in that reliable promise. It is this faith that gives Paul such joy in the little fledgling church at Thessalonica. He prays that they may “abound in love for one another and for all.” That seems to be the outward and visible sign of our living the promise that redemption is drawing near. Then Paul seems to reflect how hard it is. Faith can be worn down by the prospect of further trials. So Paul prays that he may see them face to face to bolster their faith. That is what Christian community is about. We need to meet together face to face to encourage each other and to restore one another’s faith.

If faith is the Christians' motivating power, hope is its direction. Jesus depicts the fig tree as a sign of hope. Unlike the olive, the fig tree sheds its leaves. When they are gone all that is left are the tree's bare spiky branches as though the tree itself were dead. Then it sprouts leaves and you know that summer is already near. In the same way, Jesus said, your redemption is drawing near. Have hope that when all seems gone, life will burst forth. The fig tree is a sign pointing to salvation and safety. Hope strains to see a new day, beyond what we can achieve on our own, when creation is restored, its people free, where exile is no more, and the world is new. That's what we aim for. That's what we partner with God and one another for. That is our hope.

So the scriptures have us coming and going today. But far from confusion, worry, being busy or frantic, they center us on God. There are times when things do go awry. There's no denying it. There are occasions that are earth-shattering to us, times of loss. These times when we go past our limits may be times when we learn to rely on God. Times of testing clear the space in our lives for God to be felt as present, as watching over us. Then comes the promise. We feel it. We strain our eyes to see it. We hope for it. Our faith gives us the energy to take a step forward, then another step toward it. And when weakened by further difficulties we turn to one another for courage, strength, and love. Jesus comes bringing an unshakeable message of redemption and healing. We too are brought into this world to echo his words: "stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

*Amen.*