

1st Sunday of Advent, Year C

Jeremiah 33.14-16 • Luke 21.25-36

28 November 2021

Christ Church, Chelsea

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Six weeks after the date of its title, W.H. Auden published his poem 'September 1, 1939'. That was the day on which Britain and France gave their ultimatum to Germany to withdraw its troops from Poland – an ultimatum which of course Germany would ignore, leading two days later to the outbreak of World War II. Auden's poem captures profoundly the in-betweenness of that day – and people's yearning to hold on to the familiar:

Faces along the bar
Cling to their average day:
The lights must never go out,
The music must always play,
All the conventions conspire
To make this fort assume
The furniture of home;
Lest we should see where we are,
Lost in a haunted wood,
Children afraid of the night
Who have never been happy or good.¹

The figures in Auden's poem cover up their unease and their fears, with denial and with sentimentality. They are waiting for what will happen, but they are trying to pretend to themselves that they are not waiting. Perhaps we might recognise that kind of waiting in ourselves. We wait these months to see what challenges Covid will next throw at us; we wait to see what disasters we will bring upon ourselves through the effects of climate change.

That is one kind of waiting. But there are many more. The American pastor Janice Jean Springer writes of her experience of Parkinson's disease developing within her.² She speaks of all she has lost: 'my self-image', she writes, 'as a strong and vibrant woman seems not to fit anymore'; 'I can no longer trust my body to do what I want it to do'; 'I've lost the illusion that I am exempt from the losses and limits that besiege other people'. And yet, she continues, she has found a way to live in this new state: 'In an attempt to feel

¹ As reproduced in Fleming Rutledge, *Advent*, (2019), p.8

² <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2015-08/illness-hermitage>

some control over my new routine, I made a list of what I was supposed to do and when I was supposed to do it. One day, as I looked at this schedule, I saw that it is not unlike the monastic practice of praying the hours, marking the day with eight times of prayer. I inserted the Latin names of the hours of prayer into my daily routine of pills and naps and exercises. Now, each time I check the schedule I'm reminded that my day is permeated with prayer.' Springer is, in one sense, waiting for the next stage in her disease. But she is taking part in that waiting, shaping her body and soul to be ready for what will come next.

And then of course we wait with excitement and anticipation. Most, perhaps all, of us, will remember as a child what those final days before Christmas are like. The decorations go up around the house. The fridge is stuffed full of delicious foods. Rolls of wrapping paper lie around as salivating signs of what is to come. 'O Come, O Come, Emmanuel' we sang at the start of our service. With how much more passion would we sing that if we longed for Christ's coming with as much energy and excitement as a child looks forward to Christmas Day?

And then we wait for a new time and a new place. I remember some years ago wandering around Mount Hope cemetery in Boston, Massachusetts. It's a beautiful place: wide avenues, wooded areas opening onto hilly vistas, a small lake that perfectly reflected the colours of the surrounding fall leaves. And the friend I was with explained how the creation of the cemetery in the 1850s was a deliberately new statement about death. Past cemeteries laid up row upon row of bodies, layer piled upon layer, all with their feet to the east, so that at the second coming, like a morbid game of Guess Who, all might simultaneously arise to meet their Maker. Mount Hope, like some of the great Victorian cemeteries around London, sought to be more than simply a waiting room for the new earth. This was itself a beautiful place: a place for mourners and other city-dwellers to come and explore; to ponder; to enjoy the good things of creation. We wait for the next life, but at the same time give thanks for the life we have been given here-and-now.

In our lives we know many kinds of waiting. And that *range* of waiting is true too of Advent, the season we enter today. For Advent is traditionally a time of waiting, a time when we anticipate that which is (to render the Latin *adventus* literally) coming: the First Coming of Christ as the babe in the manger, and Christ's Second Coming to make all things new. We are bidden, in Advent, to wait; to '[b]e on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life. ... Be alert at all times.' (Luke 21.34, 36a)

And what kind of waiting are we engaging in over the next month? Certainly, we wait with anticipation (and perhaps a degree of trepidation) for Christmas. A time of celebration is coming, and I for one hope that the Christmas of 2021 will be a time of great togetherness and joy.

But Advent reminds us that we wait for more than simply our turkey and stuffing. As Christians we wait with hope. This hopeful attitude is also a gift of Christmas: God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. And, in similar fashion, our great garden cemeteries speak of God's love for his creation, and of hope in our coming reunion with our departed loved ones in a beautiful new earth.

What's more, Advent offers us a time when we may imitate Janice Jean Springer pressing her Parkinson's afflicted body into its prayerful rhythm. Advent gives us a month in which we may allow ourselves to acknowledge our fragility and our short lives, and so order our lives to be a holy and living sacrifice to God.

And, lastly, in Advent we might call to mind how many around this world wait with longing for the day when God will, in the words of the prophet Jeremiah, 'execute justice and righteousness in the land' (Jeremiah 33.15). Among them are the communities who will suffer the effects of the climate change they did not bring about; those who long to receive a Covid vaccine; those oppressed and persecuted by their own leaders. And we might ask ourselves how that awareness of those waiting masses makes us feel. Do we join with them in longing for this coming day of justice? Or are we like W.H. Auden's 'faces along the bar', insisting that 'the lights must never go out' and 'the music must always play'?

It is a weighty season, this Advent.

And it is good – dare I say even life-giving – to ponder these many ways in which we wait. Amidst the busy-ness of the coming weeks we have all the chance in the world to enter Auden's fort, formed by the 'furniture of home'. Dare, though, to acknowledge that none of us is an island; that our short time is but a blink in God's time; that we have not always acted to build up God's kingdom. For we are each, in our own way:

Lost in a haunted wood,
Children afraid of the night
Who have never been happy or good.

May the light of Christ guide us through the darkness of this world and the darker corners of our hearts, that we may faithfully and hopefully wait for the coming of the new earth of justice and peace.