

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

In the Borderlands

Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36

December 1, 2024

Advent I

Today, we are on the threshold of new time, from the old year to the new, from Christ, the King to Christ, the coming Messiah. Advent begins with the words: the days are surely coming. And we are here with them on the border between all that was and all that will be. How shall we live in this time? Advent beckons us to repent, to change, to wake up, to seek God. This is a time to rekindle spiritual disciplines, to prepare for the Lord's coming, and to renew our faith. We begin again, even those who feel today like they are too far gone or lost in the dark or whose lives have been torn apart this year.

The artist Mako Fujimora writes that spiritual people are like "border stalkers." I think this is just the way to describe what we do in Advent. We are at the intersections—the borders--of the created and uncreated, time and eternity, space and infinity, matter and spirit. The mystic writer Evelyn Underhill calls this the "double reality of life" and says we need both sides of these borders we stalk. On one side is the historical, natural, and contingent. On the other side is the timeless, supernatural, and absolute. (from Shae, Year C). We who stalk the borders between these face two tasks: to become conscious of the full-double reality of who we are and to learn to weld them together. Underhill says we "have to strike a working balance between them if we would rightly harmonize the elements of life and achieve a stable relation with reality."

That's kind of a heady description, but it's not hard to see how all of this describes the kind of balance that we need but also eludes our grasp. In the liturgical flow of the year, it's the balance between the fasting of penitential seasons like Lent and the feasting of celebrations like Easter; for families at Christmas, it's holding space for both the spiritual observance and the materialistic fun; in a 7-day week, it's a complement between meaningful labor and sabbath rest; in the monastic life, it's the interplay between prayer and work. For all of us in various aspects of life, it is that interaction between speaking and listening, giving and receiving, between caution and courage, trusting God's will and acting with initiative, between serene patience and holy rage. Working balance, right harmony, stable relation could all describe the aim of a healthy, whole, properly formed liturgical, spiritual life somewhere in these borderlands of existence.

But, it's not so easy, and especially on this day 1 of the year. The apocalyptic texts for the first Sunday of Advent launch us into the year with no generalities or pabulum about harmony, welding, and balance. In Jeremiah's reading, there is no abstraction or metaphors. God's activity is coming. Are you ready? What would it even mean to be ready?

The reading from Jeremiah today is from a short section in a long book whose dominant theme is a judgment that is coming upon you. Be ready for it. Chapter after chapter lobs judgment at Jerusalem and its leaders, insisting that Babylon is coming and anything that you do to resist is futile. The preachers going around assuring everyone they are fine- this is fine- are most condemned because they are saying ‘peace, peace’ when there is no peace. Because they have lived unbalanced lives with disharmony in their relationships with God and with one another, everything is going to be torn apart, that it may hopefully begin again. It can be a hard book to read. But then again, deep calls to deep, and truth speaks truth, and sometimes the hardest thing to hear is the thing our soul most needs. Sometimes, the flimsy lives we’ve built get torn down and then they can build again. We look back at these moments and say, “That was the Lord’s doing.”

In Luke’s gospel reading likewise, the ‘historically flowing’ and ‘changelessly absolute’ sides of reality are being ripped apart. It’s a startling way to begin the year unless it’s how you’re already experiencing your world, and then it’s not startling at all. It’s just true. In the gospel, signs in the sun, moon, and stars and on the earth are of creation falling apart-- Genesis being unwound. The seas, consigned to their ocean containers, are boiling in a comeback. The land, the place of safety, is shaking under their feet. They are afraid. They should be. Heaven and earth will pass away. Be on guard. And this is how we begin?

With these texts, Advent begins in disharmony, in unstable relations, in un-welding what needs to be pulled apart. Advent begins in the dark. That’s an evocative phrase from the preacher Fleming Rutledge. “That’s what I think is so important about the season,” she says, “The uniqueness of Advent is that it really forces us--more than any other season, even more than Lent, to look deeply into *what is wrong* in the world, and why the best-laid plans don’t work out the way we meant them to, and why our greatest hopes are so often confounded, and why things happen the way they do, and why sometimes it is so difficult to see where God is acting.” Advent begins in the dark with the question, “Where is God?”

It’s even more than dark where we begin today with Luke and Jeremiah. It’s in the harrowing, the tearing apart, breaking down, falling apart, un-welding, un-balancing, disharmony. We are taken to the shadowlands of existence--wherever lives have been torn apart and left beaten up on the side of the road. But that’s the place—just there-- where border-stalkers are at their best.

Advent begins in the dark. Advent begins from the dark. But we are going somewhere. Advent begins *from* the dark but goes *toward* the light. There is a stirring that happens within us, within even the deepest darknesses. That stirring says, “There will be light in the world; there will be life again.” Where is God? On the borderlands, in the shadowlands, in the places where everything has gone wrong.

Today, we confess and cling to such a promise. That God is a God who is taking us somewhere, somewhere good. And so we begin today. Looking for life on the borders. Looking for light in the shadowlands. Looking for renewal within us. Someday, we pray,

maybe we'll grow into the unitive spiritual harmony, balance, and peace with God, neighbor, and self that eludes us, even if we're nowhere near there now. Somedays, we would be satisfied and happy if God just gave us one step to place in front of the other. That's where we always begin, and that's where we begin again.

For some of us, mystics and preachers and artist-philosophers point the way, but I'm thinking of a different sort of icon of hope today that's more on my level. In 2008, we were introduced by Pixar films to the little robot named Wall-E, a little rusted android rummaging around in the 29th century, cleaning a post-apocalyptic, abandoned earth—an impossible task. The last sentient do-gooder in a big, abandoned world. Though released in the summer, *Wall-E* is an Advent movie, and on this, I stand my ground. We have lots of Christmas movies, many of which are terrible, and on this also, I stand my ground. But *Wall-E* is an Advent movie, and it's a good one. It begins from the dark with a creature—a character alone, too small for a world that is not only too big but also too desecrated for any little clean-up job. And he's not good at it anyway.

Then he meets another android sent back to Earth from former earthlings seeking asylum in far-off galaxies. He learns that her name is an acronym for Extraterrestrial Vegetation Evaluator. “E.V.E.” Come on. Her name is Eve! Eve's task is to scan the planet---everywhere she can look, anywhere she can find—to scan the entire dead planet for any sustainable life, a futile task on a dead, dark, desecrated planet. Until the day it's not. Together, Wall-e and Eve discover in a discarded boot a single seedling beginning to sprout green. It's just a tiny shoot, really, with one puny leaf on it, but it's alive and growing. And with it, the adventure to knit creation and its people back together begins. The branch springing up is a paltry sign compared with mountains of discard and despair that represent our dislocation from life as it was intended to be. But if it's alive and if it's growing, there is hope. That's how it's an Advent movie. Purple is the official color of Advent, but the green of a new branch where there was none before is the color of new life for Wall-E and Eve, and for Jeremiah. Jeremiah was a vegetation evaluator on a border of desecration and destruction when he prophesied, “There will be a new branch, there will be a green sprout from the root of David. And with it, God will act again to bring true peace and hope.” Like Eve, like Jeremiah, border-stalkers sleuth for signs of life—real, green life, wherever it may be found.

“The days are surely coming,” says the Lord.

Advent begins from the dark and begins where any little light shines into deep darkness, where those whose lives have been torn apart find upon them resting the slightest ray of light, and where landscapes spout the tenderest shoot of green. Advent is not the dark. Advent begins when there is the faintest hope in the dark. Our Advent begins where you think everything is dead, but then, where you didn't expect it, like the womb of a virgin, Life.

The days are surely coming.

During these weeks, we are called to leave behind a resigned and routine way of life. We stalk the borders with vigilance and commitment. We stalk the borders of darkness and light, despair and hope. We watch at all times, praying.

To be mindful and to pray with eyes closed and with eyes wide open. This is how to live in the time between now and Christmas. To be mindful and to pray and to open ourselves to new life wherever it will be found.

Here is the path:

to search for one shoot of green,
for any ray of light,
for one place of peace,
for any sign of hope.

It is there. It is within you. Because you are the border, and God is stalking you. And God will not rest and will not stop at anything—neither life nor death. God will not stop at anything until you are his and until you are home.

The days are surely coming. “Arise, your redemption is drawing near.” And He is coming.

Thanks to God. Amen.

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