

DECEMBER 2nd, 2018: FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT
Jeremiah 33:14-16 I Thessalonians 3:12-4:2 Luke 21:25-28, 34-36

One of the problems with looking forward to celebrating Christmas in a month is that we often spend a lot of that period looking backward instead of forward. We zero in on past Christmases, trying to replicate the best of them. Without remembering such ideal celebrations, Christmas wouldn't have its proper meaning.

Yet considering it was more than three or four centuries before the feast of Christmas came into existence, that's not the way Jesus' earliest followers celebrated his entering their lives. They were never interested in just forming schmaltzy memories that they could conjure up every year.

Of course, their images of him were different from our own. Given their Jewish background, once his disciples understood him to be the long-awaited Messiah, he was burdened with the "baggage" attached to that title. For instance, as we hear in today's Jeremiah passage, Jesus the Messiah will not only be the one bringing peace to the two Jewish nations of Israel and Judah, he'll also do whatever's just and right for everyone in the land; demonstrating, as a good Jew, how to have the proper relationships with God and those around us.

In the earliest Christian writing we possess – I Thessalonians – Paul couldn't be clearer about those relationships. Having taken the unheard-of step of permitting non-Jews to follow Jesus without first becoming Jews, the Apostle can't encourage his Gentile converts to include Jewish laws and culture in their following of the risen Christ. He can only insist on forming just relationships with Jesus and others. He has no better prayer for his community than, "May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we have for you" Jesus in our lives makes all the difference in our lives.

But his/her presence also changes the way we look at the future. Luke testifies to that phenomenon in today's gospel pericope: the well-known "apocalyptic" section of his gospel. It's significant that this type of literature was the most frequently employed genre in religious writings shortly before and after Jesus' birth. Many would-be sacred authors spoke about the end of the world and the phenomena accompanying it, using esoteric, symbolic language to avoid being sued for breach of promise. Knowing how frequently this genre was utilized, it's amazing only two biblical books – Daniel and Revelation - plus a chapter in each Synoptic gospel, were written in this style.

In some sense, in today's passage Luke is only informing his community about one thing. Though many people, not only Christians, are awaiting the world's imminent end, the evangelist only wants Jesus' followers to know that when it finally happens Jesus will play an essential role. When this world as we know it goes down the tubes, followers of Jesus will experience ". . . the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory."

But Luke is convinced we can't go around with our heads in that cloud just waiting for Jesus' arrival. There's lots to do in the meantime. We can't sit on our hands taking bets on the time of the Parousia, nor risk becoming "drowsy from carousing and drunkenness and the anxieties of daily life"

If the world as we know it is going to end with all these distressing signs, we've got to keep in shape, else we'll get bowled over. Staying vigilant will be our main occupation. Jesus' first followers were always warned to get out of the past and appreciate the present and the future, no matter how comfortable and non-challenging their past was. Jesus' coming always means there's more to life than just memories.

DECEMBER 9TH, 2018: SECOND SUNDAY ADVENT

Baruch 5:1-9 Philippians 1:4-6, 8-11 Luke 3:1-6

“When things get better, I’ll make my move.”

Ever say that or something similar under your breath? It’s certainly a valid excuse for not doing what the risen Jesus asks us to do. “This just isn’t the right platform. There’re too many grey areas in my life. I’ve got good intentions, but this isn’t the time and place to carry them out. God knows I have dreams for a better world in my heart. Eventually I’ll carry through on them, but in the meantime”

Perhaps these justifications for our inaction are why Luke begins his gospel with today’s historical overview of the historical Jesus’ day and age. Why did God choose this particular time and place in which to send his/her son into the world? They certainly weren’t ideal. In some sense, they were just like any other time and place. They had their good points and their bad points. Galilee was just as significant as Illinois; Herod and Caiaphas as any of our political and religious leaders today. John the Baptizer and Jesus of Nazareth had no choice but to play the hands they were dealt. Neither could set up ideal conditions in advance. Long before anyone created poster art, both learned to grow where they were planted. Had they waited for a better time and place, God’s will would never have been accomplished.

They’re not the first followers of God to experience similar, challenging situations. Baruch, who seems to have worked with the prophet Jeremiah, lived in a world that was falling apart. His mentor had finally reached a point in which he was convinced Yahweh’s Chosen People were incapable of reform. His only hope was for an enemy to wipe them out, drag the remnant of the people into exile and start their faith experience over again. Only this time they’d better not screw things up.

Baruch has no choice but to prophesy against this “iffy” background. He’s not even certain Israel will continue to exist for more than a few years. Yet the prophet is convinced Yahweh will eventually take care of the people even though both Jerusalem’s present and immediate future aren’t very promising. Baruch has terrific faith in an imperfect history. He doesn’t have any other history in which he’s involved.

Reflecting on the importance of our historical context, perhaps the most helpful of today’s readings is our Philippians pericope. Paul is convinced the specific day and age in which he and his community are involved is actually an ongoing process. Their experiences are constantly evolving. “I am confident,” he writes, “that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.” One thing is certain: “Your love (will) increase ever more and more in knowledge and every kind of perception to discern what is of value” Eventually “things” will become clearer, though at the present moment I’m still wondering what I’m doing here.

We, like John the Baptizer, have no control over when the word of God comes to us. We’re simply expected to recognize and use it the way he/she expects us to. The historical John seems to have been a member of the Dead Sea scroll community, ministering in a place that has less than an inch of rain a year, preaching to someone who not only doesn’t want to hear him, but eventually has him killed.

The late Cardinal John Wright once asked us North American College students, “What would you do if you’re the best preacher in the diocese and your bishop assigns you as chaplain to an institution for the hearing impaired?” Certainly wouldn’t be the first time only God knows what I’m doing here.

COPYRIGHT 2018 – ROGER VERMALEN KARBAN