

“CLOSER THAN YOU THINK!”
Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36
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They had been buddies since the sixth grade, when they were in Confirmation class together. They had been best friends in high school as they both played in the marching band and in the school's jazz band. They had gone to college, stayed in touch, and now had jobs in the same city. Their friendship grew as they both got married and now got together socially as couples. They both would have a beer as they watched their favorite teams play football. Both were in lines of work where cocktail parties were par for the course. But it seemed that when Milton started drinking, he had difficulty stopping after one or two drinks. It also became apparent that when he started drinking, his personality changed dramatically. Usually an easygoing, fun-loving guy, he became angry and abusive. On more than one occasion, his friend Stanley had observed this behavior. It began to get more pervasive and more alarming. Marital problems ensued. His wife threatened to leave him. His job was in jeopardy because of the many times he was calling off sick. Finally, after much prayer, his friend Stanley sat down with him and had a talk. “Milton,” he said, “This thing has gotten the best of you. Alcohol is destroying your life. You say you are going to limit your drinking, but you can't do it. You are going to have to stop drinking all together and join Alcoholics Anonymous. In fact, there's a meeting tonight, and I've arranged for a sponsor to take you.”

At first, Milton was defensive and extremely resistant. But when Stan pointed out that he was about to lose his wife and his job, Milton's demeanor began to change. Eventually he agreed to go to an A.A. meeting, and slowly, his life began to change — for the better! His productivity improved at work. His marriage got better by leaps and bounds, and although he was initially furious with his friend Stanley for confronting him, still today they are the best of friends.

What I have just shared is a true story. Only the names changed to protect the confidentiality of the two men. It is the story of what happens when life gets out of hand, and we try to escape through drinking or drugs or internet porn or a host of other behaviors that can eventually lead to addiction and a downward spiral in our quality of life. It is also a story with a happy ending — or should I say a story that is moving in a positive direction --- for no one is ever completely cured of alcoholism or drug addiction or workaholism. We always have to keep vigil, and we always have to keep working at it. More than that, it is the story of someone who cared enough about his friend to stick his neck out a mile, someone who loved his friend enough to risk that friendship to intervene in his life in a significant way. On that afternoon when the two men met for coffee, Stanley had no idea how the conversation would go. He only knew that for Milton's sake, he had to intervene.

We begin this morning the season of Advent. It hardly seems time for that four-week countdown to begin — after all, Thanksgiving was only three days ago, and many folks are still visiting with their families. But as we all know, Christmas is coming. For many, Christmas is an interruption in the normal flow of the activities of our lives. That is appropriate, for at its basic and most fundamental level, **Christmas is the story of a God who loves us enough to interrupt us — a God who loves us enough to intervene in our lives.** And Advent is the season when we call attention to the fact that we are about to be interrupted!

I don't know about you, but I don't like interruptions. Just ask my wife! When I am in the back room of our house working on a sermon or a newsletter article or reading a book, I don't want to be interrupted. But sometimes I lose track of time. The phone will ring or someone will come to the door, and I am just amazed at how much time has passed! Usually it's later than I thought it was.

Jeremiah reminds us that God is on his way to our world, and that he is coming soon. We don't have all day. He is closer than we think, and the hour is later than we think. We may have become so busy with the daily routine, just doing our best to keep our heads above the water, that we have lost track of time. It was Rabbi Abraham Heschel who said, "*A prophet is one who knows what time it is.*"(1) Prophets read the signs and tell us what God is going to do. Jeremiah tells us that God is about to intervene in our world. Jesus tells his disciples to look at the fig tree. When leaves come on its branches, it means that summer time is on its way. We who live in Cleveland don't have to search for a fig tree. The Scripture tells us that it doesn't have to be a fig tree. Any tree will do, for the signs of God's coming are all around us. Do you know what time it is?

Sometimes when an important date is coming and we talk about our plans, someone will say, "Oh, that's months away," and someone else will reply, "It will be here before you know it! ***It's closer than you think!***" Although Christmas is four weeks away, it's closer than we think!

Both Jeremiah and Jesus tell us to get ready for the interruption that is about to take place. God is going to intervene, and we need to get ready, so we can handle that intervention. There's a lot of preparation that goes on in this season. We prepare our homes for the holidays by cleaning and decorating. We buy gifts for those we love. The smart shoppers among us watch for things to go on sale so that we will get the best prices. My wife and I are going to visit our son and daughter-in-law after Christmas. We watched for many weeks to try to get the best price on airline tickets. We almost gave up and just bought them, because the prices are so unpredictable.

Jeremiah never gives up hope. In spite of the worst kind of turmoil — his nation destroyed, many people deported to a foreign land, the remnant left weakened and demoralized -- still Jeremiah never loses direction and never gives up a sense of hope. An Ethiopian legend tells about a shepherd boy named Alemayu. One night he was stranded on an icy mountain, clothed in the thinnest of wraps. When he got safely back to the village, they asked him how he had survived under such life-threatening circumstances. He explained that the sky was dark, the night biting cold, and he thought he would die. But then he saw a shepherd's fire far off on another mountain. He kept his eyes on the red glow of fire and never lost the hope of being warm.

Some say, "Don't get your hopes up," but that is precisely what hope is for. Hope keeps our heads up and our hearts turned toward the future. First century Roman scholar Pliny said,

“Hope is the pillar that holds up the world. Hope is the dream of the waking man.”(2) Nineteenth century American poet Emily Dickinson wrote, *“Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul / And sings the tune without the words / And never stops at all.”*(3) Hope narrows the gap between the promise of Advent’s first Sunday and its fulfillment on Christmas Day. Hope moves us forward through Advent to Christmas.

Note that while interventions and interruptions disturb the way we live our lives, God’s intervention is meant not to destroy us, but rather to save us from ourselves. Left to our own devices, we might miss the bold new thing that God is doing. Left to our preoccupations, we might miss the Kingdom all together. So, therefore, Jesus says, *“Be on guard that your hearts are not weighted down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap... Be alert at all times!”*(4) Watch for what God is about to do.

God’s interruption is intended to make our lives better, not worse. Jeremiah’s prophecy is not about gloom and doom but about a day when justice and righteousness will prevail and all will dwell in peace and harmony, and no one will need to be afraid.

God is worth waiting for! That is the message of Advent. While the dawn is coming, it is not here yet. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to tell us that God’s kingdom has not arrived in all its fullness. One glance at this morning’s *Plain Dealer* or five minutes watching television news will keep us well aware that there is a lot about this world that is not godly. The Bible tells us that we live between the “already” of Jesus first coming and the “not yet” of his final triumph of righteousness. Someone has said that the church exists to remind us that we live in the time between what is dying and what is being born — between the “already” of Christ’s reign and the “not yet” of Advent.(5) God’s reign is right now — growing, changing and coming into its season when it will bear fruit. But we all know that God’s intervention has yet to have its full impact on the minds and hearts of many, many people, and so we wait in hope.

How do we live during Advent, during the time when we see God interrupting, yet see many choosing to ignore the God who loves us enough to intervene? In a particular community, there was a monastery in which lived a group of Christian monks. Through the years, they had begun to decline in numbers. They were all aging. There were no new monks coming to join their community. The townspeople had all but forgotten they were there, and no one from the outside ever attended their worship services. They became despairing of their bleak situation. And so they decided to go to a nearby rabbi for advice, since they had heard that he was a very wise and holy man. He listened to their story and heard the despair in their voices. He thought for a long time and then made only one comment: *“The Messiah has come, and is among you, living already in your midst.”*

The monks went back to the monastery. Because they did not know which one of them was the Messiah, they began to treat each other — to a person — as if he was the Messiah. Soon they discovered changes. Their love for one another grew. Hopelessness and despair seemed to evaporate. Their numbers grew, and new, young monks joined their order, invigorating their life together. Their monastery was noticed again by the townspeople, and before long, many members of the community regularly attended the monks’ worship services.

What better way to live between the already and the not yet of the reign of Christ, than by living each day as if the Messiah has come and is dwelling in our midst! This morning, I tell you, Jesus is closer than you think. He has come again and he is here among us, living already

in our midst. Yes, we worship a God who loves us enough to interrupt us, a God who loves us enough to intervene in our lives. May we recognize God's presence, and live each day for him!

Prayer: Lord, give us the grace to be prepared for the interruption of your grace among us. Give us the courage to receive you when you intrude into our lives, and give us the wisdom to follow you into the future that only you can give. Amen.

Notes:

1. Quoted in the *Christian Century*. Vol. 126. No. 23., p. 21.
2. Quoted in *Clergy Journal*. Vol. 85. No. 7., p. 19.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
4. Luke 21:34-36
5. Beechy, Leonard. *Reflections on the Lectionary*. *Christian Century*. Vol. 126. No. 23., p. 21.