

Light the candles (Jeremiah 33:14-16)

November 28, 2006

One Thanksgiving my husband and I went to Alabama to visit family. When the time came for us to drive back home, I said, "It's pitch-black dark. I wish we were not leaving so late." When my husband replied, "It's 5:00 in the afternoon," I said glumly, "It feels like the middle of the night."

How odd that the most hopeful season of the Christian calendar begins in the midst of darkness! When we light the first candle on the Advent wreath, it will not be a second too soon. This Advent I feel an urgent need for the light that comes from God, and I do not think I am the only one. I try not to be a crepehanger, but Lord have mercy, the war in Iraq has lasted so long. The voices of division in our land are so loud. The clouds of anxiety about the future are hovering so low and close that you can barely see your hand in front of your face.

Here is another odd thing: on the first Sunday of Advent, the beginning of a new year for the Christian church, the lectionary brings us the apocalypse. We begin our preparations for the coming of the Christ child with a heart-stopping passage that predicts the end of the world. Jesus speaks of "signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars," of "distress among nations," of people who "will faint from fear and foreboding."

That kind of talk would ordinarily make me want to crawl under the bed and stay there, but this Advent I am holding on for dear life to the reassurance that God intends to make the world right again. Jeremiah's "little book of consolation" is reassuring: "The days are surely coming when I will fulfill the promise I made." Apparently, with God a promise made is a promise kept. Given the empty wasteland all around, I don't know how Jeremiah could see anything hopeful about the future. Yet he was sustained by his conviction that the outcome of human history was in the hands of God, who could be trusted to make the city a place of safety and the land a center of salvation.

Our present day is rife with millennialists who drool over the prospect of the end of the world. Many of them are motivated less by hope for the world than by the desire

to see those whom they consider to be among God's unfavored get their just desserts. A friend of mine once saw a sign in front of a bait shop on a country road that read: "Smile! Our God is a consuming fire!"

Is the promise of the coming of the Son of Man bad news for some? Good news for all? Jesus implies that it will be a fearful thing for just about everybody but then adds, "Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your head, because your redemption is drawing near." What a strange blend of warning and comfort.

Such news reminds me of my recent cataract surgery. Days before the procedure, I was given several kinds of drops to put into my eye daily. The drops came with complex instructions and warnings. After the procedure, I was told in no uncertain terms that I was not to sleep on my back or pick up a sack of groceries or ever touch my eye. I became convinced that if I did not do exactly as I was told, I would never see again. Yet I could sense the deep care and compassion of my doctor and others on the medical staff. Every day for a week after the surgery, someone in the clinic called to inquire about my well-being and vision.

Apparently the point of the warnings and the compassionate concern, coming together as they did, was to help me see better.

Jesus had the same purpose in mind when he spoke of the end of the world and then reassured his followers with the parable of the fig tree: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near." Perhaps telling us of his second coming is our Lord's way of performing spiritual cataract surgery on his followers. He wants us to be able to see things for what they are and not be fooled by the powers of this world. He wants us to be able to take the long view so that we can see the arrival of a world marked by God's justice and righteousness.

No one has ever expressed the hope of the second coming more clearly for me than Martin Luther King Jr.: "I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word." Until then, we are bound by faith not to be weighed down by the worries of this life. There is too much work to do, too much watchful readiness to maintain. I love the word *prolepsis*, which means acting as if what you expect to happen has already happened.

During the colonial period in American history, an eclipse of the sun caught members of a New England state legislature off guard. In the midst of general panic a motion was made to adjourn, but one of the legislators stood up and said, "Mr. Speaker, if it is not the end of the world and we adjourn, we shall appear to be fools. If it is the end of the world, I choose to be found doing my duty. I move you, sir, let candles be brought."

Bring on the Advent candles, and let's live in love and act in hope until our Lord comes again.