

Part 1 (before worship begins)

Our worship service needs a few words of introduction this morning because it may not be what you are expecting on this weekend when news reports are filled with updates on the crowds at the malls for Christmas shopping, our email boxes and mail boxes are filled with enticements to great bargains, and the TV has already had three nights of Christmas/holiday specials. I sense that I need to explain to you why we won't be talking about Christmas today, so I'm going to split my sermon into two parts – first, an introduction to Advent and second, a look at the scripture reading from Habakkuk. I promise that the two parts together will not be longer than my typical sermon.

I used to say that Advent (the four Sundays prior to Christmas) is an Old Testament season. I think we can be more precise than that and say that Advent is the season of Exile. In both the traditional lectionary and the Narrative Lectionary we are using this year, the readings for Advent remind us that the coming of the Messiah must be understood in the context of the people of Israel's experience with Exile – that time after Jerusalem and the temple was destroyed in 587 B.C. and the monarchy ended. It is a time of despondency and despair, a time of questioning. The main Exile question is the one posed by the prophet Habakkuk on the cover of the bulletin: *O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?*

There are two Advent symbols to which I want to draw your attention here at the beginning of worship. The first is the deep blue color of the banners and candles. I invite you to understand this as the color of the night sky. Don't focus on the stars or the candle. Focus on the darkness – the absence of light, the absence of hope.

The second symbol is on the window over here – a stump. Advent is like a stump. The growing season is over, the crops have been harvested and the fields are bare. All over the Northern Hemisphere, trees and bushes are down to their brown branches, with most of the leaves and all the colorful flowers and fruits gone. Dusk comes earlier every day, as if the daylight is being cut off before our eyes.

The prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah are the source for the image of a stump. Jeremiah lived at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem, and Habakkuk whom we read today lived at the same time. For Jeremiah, the king was a symbol for the whole country, for all the descendants of Abraham. Now that Judah had no king and the city of Jerusalem and its temple lay in ruins, he observes that the people of Israel are nothing but a stump.

Advent is for people who at times feel they are stumps. Advent is for people who sense that the darkness is pressing in upon them. That may not be your situation today, but it likely has been or will be at some point in your life. Our joys cut down, we feel as if we are a piece of wood that other people are sitting on top of. It seems as if nothing in or around us is still alive. Maybe it is unemployment: will a job ever come through? Maybe it is depression: will the darkness ever break? Maybe it is serious illness for our self or a loved one: will health be restored? Maybe it is the death of a loved one: will my grief and loneliness ever heal? Maybe it is the distress you feel at the violence in Ferguson that forces us to confront the reality that the sins of racism are still with us. Maybe it is the distress you feel with each new incident of a suicide bomber killing or maiming scores of people and though it is on the other side of the planet you ponder the darkness of a world that nurtures such violence. Maybe it is infertility or chemical dependency or the challenges of parenting or the despair of feeling stuck in a situation in which you don't know what to do. One doesn't get through life without these dry and deathly times.

The church year gives us the season of Advent each year for us all to accompany one another through life. We practice these feelings each year in Advent devotions and Advent worship. Yes, we are all stumps – you this year, maybe me next year, but I also a stump this year because of you. Yes, we all sit in darkness at times.

So today on this First Sunday of Advent we focus on the stumpiness and darkness of life. This is not going to be the last word – Christmas is indeed coming. But for the coming of Jesus to be a true source of joy and hope, it is important that we acknowledge that for us, or for the person sitting next to us, we are stumps sitting in darkness. With all this in mind, let us begin our worship...

A reading from the book of Habakkuk:

The oracle that the prophet Habakkuk saw.

O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you “Violence!” and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrong-doing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous— therefore judgment comes forth perverted.

Then the LORD answered me and said: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay. Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith.

Habakkuk responds:

Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will exult in the God of my salvation. GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, and makes me tread upon the heights.

Part 2 (after the scripture readings)

Habakkuk could relate to Isaiah’s and Jeremiah’s image of the stump. He was living it. He laments, “O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you “Violence!” and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrong-doing and look at trouble?” So too, Jesus, in the Garden of Gethsemane, overwhelmed at the circumstances in which he finds himself, says “I am deeply grieved...My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.” Perhaps here more than anywhere else, we see that Jesus fully shared our human experience, knowing the darkness of feeling alone and vulnerable.

But being a stump and experiencing darkness is not the last word.

A stump still has its roots. There is the possibility that its root system will send up fresh sprigs and a new tree will grow in the old place. Both Isaiah (11:1) and Jeremiah (33:15) lift up the hope that a new branch will grow from the family tree of Jesse, who was the father of David. They trust that the LORD God will fulfill the promise that a descendant of David will rise up to be the faithful shepherd for God’s people.

Habakkuk lifts up the same promise with a different image. He writes, *Then the LORD answered me and said: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it.* [That’s a great image – write it in letters big enough so that if someone is running past they can still read it and understand the message. Make it billboard size.] *For there is still a vision for the appointed time... If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come.*

That is the key message for the First Sunday of Advent. *There is still a vision...wait for it...it will surely come.* That is the Advent word of hope we are given in the midst of the stumps and darkness we may be experiencing. That was the hope that sustained the people of Israel in exile. It is the hope that sustains us today – God is faithful and trustworthy, able to sustain us in the midst of our stumps and darkness.

Today we light just a single candle. It’s not much in the midst of darkness, but even the light of a single candle has the power to generate hope. In the coming weeks, more candles will be lit, hope will grow, until the dawn of a new day, a new creation, in the coming of the Sun of Righteousness.

How do we live in the meantime? We do well to make Habakkuk’s words our own: *Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will exult in the God of my salvation.*

I have come to cherish this next hymn, #252. William and Annabeth Gay had the tradition for their annual Christmas letter of writing a hymn text and tune for their friends. They wrote this one in 1969. Those of us old enough to remember that time will recall this was a difficult time in our country – a year after the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy, a period of race riots and protests over the Vietnam War, the era when the cover of *Time Magazine* asked, “Is God Dead?” (April 8, 1966) All of this is reflected in the first two stanzas. But in the third stanza, William writes (like Habakkuk before him), “*Yet I believe beyond believing that life can spring from death, that growth can flower from our grieving, that we can catch our breath and turn transfixed by faith.*” Anticipating Christmas, it ends with this prayer, “*O Child of ecstasy and sorrows, O Prince of peace and pain, brighten today’s world by tomorrow’s, renew our lives again; Lord Jesus, come and reign!*”

That’s what Advent is all about. Amen