

## “Look at the Branches!”

Sermon: Year C Advent 1

Text: Luke 21:25–36, Jeremiah 33:14–16

Preached December 2, 2018 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, Illinois

O come, O come, Emmanuel, God present with us. AMEN

I want to thank the Worship and Music Committee and the Table Preparers for getting things ready for Advent. One of the things we talked about was how nice it would be to have additional greenery this year, in addition to the Advent wreath. Sara Mauk did a lovely job getting greenery on the doors outside. I figured I would do my part, as well. Unfortunately, with all that was going on this week, I didn't get a chance to put any of it out, so if you'll bear with me, I'm going to do that right now. *[Pull out shopping bag with bare twigs with buds on them, begin placing them on the altar and pulpit.]* Someone with more skill can help arrange it all later. There we go...I'm feeling more Christmas-y already, aren't you? “Deck the halls ...” *[Step back and survey.]* Though...it's not very...green...is it? Well, not now at any rate... It looks pretty much like bare branches right now. Ah, but don't look at the bare branches, look at the buds. If you look closely, you can see that there are leaf buds all along these branches, and flower buds on some of them. They're *going* to be green. It's what we might call “future greenery,” or maybe “not-yet greenery.” You just have to know what you're looking at. And we will need to wait a little while longer.

You know, as I read today's gospel lesson, and the lesson from Jeremiah, I think maybe this is more appropriate greenery for advent than the evergreen boughs we normally use. I was really pleased that Sara included twigs in the beautiful planters she created outside. I think this other kind of greenery, this *future* greenery, not the lush stuff that we can see on the Advent wreath, is more what Jesus had in mind when he was talking to his disciples, and it has more to teach us. What did Jesus tell us? He said, “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.” Now, I don't know if you have ever seen a fig tree, but you certainly know what oaks and maples and magnolias look like—and if you take the time to look closely, you will see the buds along the branches, or at the tips of them, and you know that at some point in the relatively near future, after the winter is past, there will be leaves sprouting, even flowers on some, from each bud, and summer cannot be far behind. So Jesus is telling us to look at the buds, because they are signaling something important that is about to happen, a new season. And what is about to happen, is that the kingdom of God is about to break in, that entirely new season for humanity and for all of the created world. In fact, it's already here, just about to burst into leaf and flower and fruit. Can you see it in the buds?

Jesus says this to his disciples right in the middle of a rather scary warning about some very unpleasant and disconcerting stuff—signs in the heavens, distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and waves, people fainting from fear of what's coming, the powers of the heavens being shaken. Now some folks would want you to read that only as a very dramatic, end-of-the-world apocalyptic cataclysm. And they want to scare you into behaving, so you don't get left behind when, according to their reading of scripture, Jesus comes back on a cloud to rapture the true believers up and whisk us off to a far-off heaven. But I don't think you have to read it that way. Even though we read these words at a time that we're waiting for a cute little baby in an often-sentimentalized manger scene, Jesus says these words to his disciples just before his own suffering and death on the cross. His own world, and that of his disciples, is about to be shaken to the core within days, not in some far-distant future. Cataclysm is *already* upon them, it is at hand. But so is resurrection and redemption.

And in the face of calamity, Jesus tells them to look not just at the bare branches, but at the buds. He says that the calamities themselves are signs over which we can *rejoice*, because they signal that our redemption is near, that God's kingdom is breaking in upon us, pushing its way out to life, life that comes out of bare branches. He is telling us to be bud watchers. Stand up, raise your heads, look up at the branches...do you see the buds? The kingdom of God is near. It's not in some far-off pearly-gated realm that we can only get to if we're very, very good...it's right here, among us, right now, in the midst of us, in us, in all of its potential. The branches may be stripped bare and appear dead—but there's resurrection life and vitality in them, if you just know how to look. Just hang on, your redemption is at hand.

And then Jesus warns against drunkenness and dissipation, not because we need to live strictly moral lives by a rigid behavioral code in order to win our way into the kingdom of heaven...no. Notice that it is not only drunkenness and dissipation, but *worrying* that he warns us against. Why? Because all those things may keep us from paying attention to the buds on the branches, may keep us from seeing that summer is at hand, that God's life is trying to burst through. Jesus wants us to be able to focus on the full life that is bursting forth.

We're more conscious somehow, in this season of late fall, early winter, of the bare branches around us. Winter's seeming death is on our doorstep. But we've all been through winters before, and we know that at the end of this season, if we wait patiently, we can be confident there will be new life in the spring and summer. The very buds on the branches tell us that this is so. Our lives are the same way, really. No matter who we are, we all have times of calamity, we all have seasons of bare branches in our lives, times when the spring and summer seem an all-too-distant possibility, when we have trouble believing that there will be greenery on our branches once more, even though we know from experience that God is faithful. We struggle with illnesses and their treatments, with family dynamics, with unemployment, with losses and burdens of all sorts. We see trouble and conflict in the world around us. Creation itself trembles with earthquakes, is consumed by fire, creeps seemingly inexorably toward climate disaster.

In the midst of our worries and cares, we may see only bare branches. Bare-branch vision can actually become a way of life for many people. But even on those bare branches, somewhere there are buds. Christ wants us to have a new perspective on our lives' bare branches. Christ says to us today, stand up, raise your heads, look at the branches...can't you see those buds, those signs of God's love for you and for the rest of creation, those signs of the inbreaking of God's righteous reign among us? Look! There are kingdom-signaling buds all along the way, if you can but notice. When you are waiting through endless hours of chemo, or are recuperating from radiation, where are the buds that signal to you God's love and inbreaking power? Is it the kindness of a nurse? Or the daughter who sits and watches a stupid DVD with you? Are they signs of God's kingdom breaking in? Don't look at the bare branches, look at the buds.

This is not some simplistic "don't worry, be happy," power-of-positive-thinking kind of spiritual optimism. No, this is a whole new perspective on the world that Jesus offers, a way of viewing things that turns us from seeing only calamity, barrenness, and death, and instead makes us alert to signs of the promise of new life, of resurrection. It is also a pragmatic view of the world, because it recognizes that sometimes we will have to wait for the bursting forth of the leaf and flower and fruit...but the promise is still there before us, if we look for the buds. If we adopt this perspective, then we look at everything differently, in our personal lives, in the life of this congregation, in our lives in society. From this perspective, for example, in the life of the assembly, we don't get so bogged down in worries over finances, or attendance, or the myriad other things we can find to get nervous about. No, from this kingdom perspective, in the midst of our worries, we lift up our heads and start looking for the buds. We start looking for those signs that God's reign is breaking out among us.

Once we start looking for them, we'll see them everywhere...and not only among those of us who are believers...no, God is fully at work in the world even without us, believe it or not. We just have to look. In a congregation I know, the pastors have started calling this watchful noticing of God's activity in the world "God sightings," and they have begun a practice of encouraging the people there to report each week where they have spotted God at work in and through people and events outside the doors of the church. I believe that this is a perspective and practice that would be beneficial to our spiritual life here at Immanuel. And when we take on the "bud-watching" perspective, we also come more and more to understand that sometimes we must wait patiently for awhile for things to come to fruition. In God's reign, life will burst forth in its due season.

Advent is a perfect time for us to be reminded of this kingdom perspective. In Advent, we recognize once again that we stand with our feet in two realities, the realities of this world and the realities of the kingdom of God. In Advent, we remind ourselves once again that we are eagerly waiting for the kingdom and for Christ's appearing among us...but we also remind ourselves that Christ has already appeared among us, and appears among us over and over again, here at the table, and also in those "kingdom buds" that are our promise that God's kingdom is already breaking into this world. So during this time of waiting and hoping, stop...stand up straight, lift up your heads, look at the branches, see the buds...don't you see that our redemption is at hand?  
AMEN