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“This Old World”

**A sermon by
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**First Sunday of Advent
November 29, 2009**

Jeremiah 33:14–16; Psalm 25:1–10; 1 Thessalonians 3:9–13; Luke 21:25–36

Once upon a time, I was convinced
that THE most meaningful way to experience Advent
must be as a young woman expecting a baby.
Three times I had that great pleasure
of being pregnant during the Advent season,
and to share with Mary and with Elizabeth
the anticipation of something wonderful just beyond the horizon;
to know the pleasure and hardship of waiting for something to come to fruition;
to be full of the miracle of secret newness;
to treasure things and to ponder in my heart
things which held the potential of both of great joy and great sorrow.

But now, in my later years,
I am experiencing Advent in an entirely new way:
in cleaning out and fixing up my mother-in-law’s former house
in preparation for putting it on the market and, hopefully, selling it.
If you picture the program on PBS, *This Old House*,
which began in 1979 with Host Bob Vila renovating
older, middle class homes along with the home owners

providing the sweat equity,
then you know something of my husband's and my current experience.
Hedge's mother, who died last March,
had lived in this little 3-bedroom ranch that she and her husband built
in Lumberton, NC for fifty years as its only occupants.
And their house was well-loved and well-kept.
And we now stand on the cusp between what has died,
and what is being reborn as we pour ourselves into this renovation.
It's exciting, but nevertheless, cleaning out and cleaning up any old house
is a tedious ordeal, especially after fifty years of habitation.

So we have spent a good deal of time cleaning out closets and drawers,
making piles of clothes to take to Good Will,
reliving history as we have matched white cotton glove to glove
and church hats to particular coats and jackets.

I found three \$100 bills tucked away in separate gloves for safe-keeping,
which meant that we had to search every glove
and every pocket and every pocketbook there-after.

I also found an economic stimulus check from George W. Bush,
which she never cashed, because as she would have told you,
"I don't need that money as badly as others".

As a matter of fact, I would say that her whole house
is a museum to her frugality,
with rubber bands from the newspapers on every doorknob,
with twist-ties from bags of bread and from boxes of baggies
collected in drawers,
with single-service plastic applesauce cups stacked on pantry shelves.

One hall closet contained nothing but Christmas decorations,
and Hedge told me emphatically,

"Don't throw anything away until I've seen it."

He, understandably, is having a difficult time

with the cosmic upheaval of losing his last living parent
and his home place.

And so I would hold up a red plastic poinsettia arrangement

with green leaves covered with glitter, and he would say,

"Yep, that used to sit on our kitchen table";

or the little ceramic statues of the choir boys

dressed in red robes with white overlays and red bows at the neck -

"Yep, those were on the mantle," he would say.

And then there was the della robbia wreath adorned

with plastic apples and pears, surrounded by a base of real evergreens –
real, meaning forever plastic, again with lots of glitter.

We seemed to use a lot of glitter in those days.

But the interesting thing about going through the drawers and closets

is that every object has a story.

Every cuff link, like the ones with the peace signs on them,

was a gift from someone at a particular time or occasion.

Every piece of jewelry, like the one that my children used as a teething ring,

is linked to a particular outfit worn on a particular visit to our home.

So it has been a labor of love, sifting through the artifacts

of my mother-in-law's life; going through my mother-in-law's house:

having someone repair the HVAC system;

power-wash the roof that is stained brown from pine-rosin;

put a new coat of white paint on the trim;

toss out the old wall-to-wall old carpet and discovering

beautiful pegged hardwood floors underneath;

take down old worn drapes and bring *light into the darkness*.

As we speak, the house is a mess.
Most of the furniture sits outside in a locked pod
 while the floors are being refinished,
the kitchen and attic are crammed and cluttered with items
 that we didn't want exposed to the weather outside,
old paint chips litter the grass where it has been blasted from the trim,
 and the yard needs raking, badly.
But, redemption is drawing near,
 and this old house is being prepared for the arrival
 of its new future residents, with its greater glory yet to come.
We don't know when they'll arrive, but in the meantime,
we're living in the between times of what has died and what is being born,
 anticipating That Great Fixin' Up Day.
We are living in the Advent of the old passing away,
 and, behold, of something new coming to be.
And as all of us know, this is an excruciating and exciting state of being,
 this Advent living; this letting go of the past and preparing for the future.

Many of you know how this Advent living feels:

 I'm sure this is how others must feel
 who have recently moved, or are planning
transitions into retirement communities, giving away possessions
 acquired over a lifetime, each with a story to tell,
and moving to a new way of life lived in tighter community.

 I'm sure this is how some may feel who has lost a spouse,
 due to death or divorce, and who must now reconfigure
as a family unit, with one less place-setting at the dinner table,
 or with one more place available to invite someone in,
 depending upon how one looks at change.

 I'm sure the Knauerts know how this feels, as they let goods and kindred

go, and hunker down in Colorado to await God's next directive. At this time of year, all of us come to the realization that we are in a state of Advent living, suspended somewhere between the first coming of Jesus, as an infant, and the second coming of the Christ, as something like a comet; feeling much more comfortable with the warm closeness of the Baby Jesus, than with the duck and cover approach of the Cosmic Christ.

The Gospel-writer Luke uses apocalyptic language to describe the state of this old world as it passes from disorder, imbalance, unsettledness, and unloveliness to a state of future glory.

The word "apocalyptic" means "unveiling", and it refers to the world that lies behind this world, just beyond the veil.

The images that Luke uses are not necessarily meant to be literal, nor are they exactly metaphorical, nor are they secret code.

But they are indicators of major transformation taking place; of a state of renovation, and of the in-breaking glory of God.

So while I might use terms like: tossed, piled, mess, crammed, chipped, cluttered, blasted, littered, pulled up, tedious, and excruciating to describe the transitional state of my mother-in-law's house;

Jesus is going to use terms like anguish, perplexity, roaring, tossing, fainting, terror, and apprehension to describe the transitional state of this old world, and these old lives, in Advent-living, as we await our redemption and this world's total make-over.

As Columbia Seminary's Kim Bracken Long says:

"God will not simply change hearts and minds,
God will transform the world and all that is in it."

(Kim Bracken Long. *Journal For Preachers*. "Preaching the Advent Texts", p. 3)

Apocalyptic language is a way of speaking which *overwhelmed* people

in the ancient world understood well.
It's a way of speaking which overwhelmed people
in today's world understand well, too, I think,
if we admit to our emotional state when things don't
go the way in which we have hoped and dreamed.
Devastation and exile were familiar to Jeremiah's people who lived
in the darkness of Babylonian oppression some six centuries
before the birth of Jesus.
To them, the promise of redemption comes in the form of a righteous branch,
which they thought had been light-deprived and lopped off for good;
a ruler from the line of David who would spring up to restore
justice and righteousness to their lives.
Jesus uses the image of "the Son of Man coming in a cloud
with power and great glory" to describe his re-entry
into this old world from the world behind the veil.
His referent is a passage from chapter 7 of Daniel, where in a vision
the prophet sees,
*"...one like a Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven.
And he came to the Ancient One
and was presented before him.
To him was given dominion and glory and monarchy,
that all peoples, nations, and languages
should serve him.
His dominion is an everlasting dominion
that shall not pass away,
And his monarchy is one that shall never be destroyed."*(Dan. 7: 13-14)
Daniel was writing some 160 years before the birth of Christ,
in yet another time of political oppression,
when the Jews were living under thumb of what is now Syria,
and being persecuted for their faith.

To them the promise of redemption brings hope of freedom from tyranny,
and the permanent establishment of liberty and justice for all,
not just for some.

“First-century Jews,” the contemporary scholar N.T. Wright observes,
“reading a passage like Daniel, would think of being oppressed,
not by mythical monsters, but by real Romans.”

(William Placher. *Jesus The Savior*, p. 28)

Those who spoke in apocalyptic terms believed that the world
was in the hands of evil forces, but that after struggle and suffering,
with the help of an all-powerful God, that justice and
righteousness and freedom would prevail.

In all four Gospels, Jesus uses the phrase “Son of Man” with its apocalyptic
resonances, more than any other term to refer to himself.

The “Son of Man” comes to the earth to save those who are lost (Luke 19:10);

The “Son of Man” has nowhere to lay his head (Matthew 8:20),

The “Son of Man” must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders,
the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed,
and after three days rise again” (Mark 8:31);

The “Son of Man” will be seated at the right hand of God
and come in judgment (Mark 13:26, 14:62).

And when Stephen was facing death as a martyr, his vision is of
“the heavens opened and the ‘Son of Man’ standing
at the right hand of God” (Acts. 7:56).

When there is lostness, homelessness, and turbulence,
when there is upheaval, when there is suffering,
when there is renovation, when there is resurrection,
the Son of Man, Jesus, stands as Lord.

Frankly, I’m not convinced that this old world is in the hands of evil forces,
but I am convinced that this old world is in the hands of forces

not the least bit interested in practicing or proclaiming love.
And what I would like to think, is that when the veil is pulled back,
or when the curtain is ripped in two, that the Son of Man
will be revealed as the One standing triumphant
with God's banner of love waving over all peoples, nations,
and languages; over all of creation.
But in the meantime, Jesus tells us to stand up, to lift up our heads,
to be careful, to be watchful, and to pray that we will be ready
for the return of the preeminence, the primacy of love in the world.
In the meantime, we wait in Advent living;
not as escapists, I hope;
not as people who want to escape the love-deprived landscape
of this old world and climb up on a roof somewhere to
to sip marguerites until Jesus returns,
although the thought is appealing.
In the meantime, we wait in Advent living, *as renovators*,
as those charged with the task of cleaning up this old world,
in anticipation of the arrival of the New Homeowner:
of pulling up the old carpets of oppression and suppression,
and laying down new floors of justice and righteousness;
of cleaning out old pockets of hatred and discrimination,
and creating habitats of safety, where all of God's children
might live lives of security and freedom;
of power-washing the stain off of places marked by *no love*,
and covering those places and with a primer of respect and dignity,
and then painting them with the rainbow colors of love,
of God is love, Jesus is God,
Jesus is love, those who abide in love, abide in God/Jesus
forever and ever.
Then we will be ready for his arrival.

Then we can stand up and lift up our heads with confidence and say,
"Come, Lord Jesus. Come, Son of Man.

Come lay your head here. Come save those who are lost.

Come with the overwhelming power of love and great glory.
WE have prepared a place for you in this old world." Amen.