

Luke 21.25-36
Jeremiah 33.14-16
1st Sunday of Advent

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Central Presbyterian Church
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(A disclaimer: This sermon was written to be spoken, which does not always translate into correct grammatical form for a document written to be read.)

Time To Get Ready

*People get ready, there's a train a comin'
You don't need no baggage, you just get on board
All you need is faith to hear the diesels hummin'
Don't need no ticket, you just thank the Lord¹*

Curtis Mayfield wrote the gospel song “People Get Ready” the year after the 1963 March on Washington. After the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, which killed four little girls, and after the assassination of President Kennedy, the song emerged in 1965 as an anthem for the later years of the Civil Rights movement.

In a time in our nation’s history where many were desperate for a better day and a better life for all of God’s children, Mayfield sang about the gospel train—coming for all people. A train where you didn’t need a ticket or baggage, where there was no barrier to riding, you just come and get on board.

The song responds to the specific tragedies of 1963 and 1964 as well as the long struggles of the Civil Rights movement. Music critic Stanley Crouch says the song tells us, “regardless of what has happened, get yourself together for this because you’re going to get a chance.”² As awful as it seems, as hopeless as it seems, it’s not over.

When asked in an interview about the inspiration for “People Get Ready” Curtis Mayfield said it was a subconscious product of growing up singing gospel in the black church and, he said, “the preachings of my grandmothers and most ministers when they reflect from the Bible.”³

His grandmothers and pastors surely were reading the apocalyptic literature of the Bible—including Luke 21. Talking about the end times. When the times will be tough. When there will be mighty struggles. When there will be persecution. When the heavens will shake and the oceans will roar. But hold on! Because your redemption is drawing near. Stand up and raise your head and see your Redeemer coming with power and glory.

These are the words that people in dire circumstances have held onto throughout generations—waiting and praying and working to be part of whatever new thing God was bringing about. It was coming slowly, but God had promised it would come.

And that’s really where we are today as we step into this holy season of Advent. It’s a season of waiting and getting ready. We remember Jesus born two thousand years ago and we give thanks for that gift of God’s love in a fragile, human baby. But today, while we re-tell the

¹ Curtis Mayfield, “People Get Ready,” 1964.

² <http://www.npr.org/news/specials/march40th/people.html>

³ *Ibid.*

story of waiting for Jesus to be born, that's not really what we're waiting for now. Because Jesus has been born and the presence of the Risen Christ lives among us.

And while Advent may seem like a countdown to opening presents and while retailers sing their favorite Christmas song, "O, How I Love Jesus,"⁴ what we're getting ready for in Advent is not the reward of everything sitting under the Christmas tree.

What we're waiting for—what we're preparing for—is much more radical and revolutionary.

We're waiting for the world to be changed. We're waiting for the powers of death and destruction to be overthrown. We're waiting for the fulfillment of the reign of God in every nook and cranny of the universe that will turn the world upside down and then right side up again.

But I'll admit, staying alert and watchful for two thousand years is a little wearisome. So after a while, we tend to settle down. We fall into an ordinary, day-to-day routine of faith and we quit watching, preparing and getting ready.⁵

And honestly, maybe we don't want such a big disruption in our lives as the returning Redeemer is likely to cause. All those signs in the heavens and on the earth are going to create some havoc in our holiday plans. Do we really want redemption—or at least, right now?

Two thousand years ago, Jesus was talking to people who knew about waiting for redemption. They were people who had escaped from the Pharaoh, had eaten bread on the run before it had time to rise. They were people who had been under the screws of Egypt, of Babylon and now, Rome. When you live like that, "redemption is the longing of [your] heart. [You] want Rome off [your] back. [You] want Caesar out of [your] hair. The coming of God's redemption means justice is coming, liberation is coming."⁶

You know, I think it's human nature that when "our own [little] kingdom has had a good year we aren't necessarily looking for God's kingdom... 'Thy kingdom come,' we pray, 'but not right away.'"⁷ That's how it seems to go.

"God's redemption is good news for people whose life is bad news. If you are a slave in Pharaoh's Egypt or a slave in antebellum Mississippi, you want...redemption"—you want that train of liberation to pull into the station today. "If you are an Israelite exiled in Babylon"⁸ or a Sudanese exiled in Chad, you want the world to change now. If you are the mother of a little girl in Birmingham or the father of a child in Baghdad, you have already done your getting ready. It is time. If you are a person with HIV/AIDS in this country or in southern Africa, you're ready to leave your baggage and climb on board. If you live with hunger or no health care or try to survive on minimum wage, you're ready for the train of justice to arrive right now.

*People get ready for the train to Jordan
Picking up passengers from coast to coast
Faith is the key: open the doors and board them
There's room for all of the loved and lost⁹*

⁴ Pete Sinclair, Letter to the editor, *Courier-Journal*, 20 December 2003.

⁵ Cornelius Plantiga, Jr., "In the interim – between two advents" in *Christian Century*, 6 December 2000, p1270.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p1271.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Curtis Mayfield with last line adapted by Eva Cassidy.

Whether our own kingdoms have had a good year or not-so good year, as children of God we join hands and hearts with all our sisters and brothers and we, too, wait for the world to be changed. We wait for the promises of God to be fulfilled.

Now there's a tendency to think about waiting for the world to be changed as just a pie in the sky escape from the despair of this world—or worse, religion's attempt to suck up to the powers and principalities of this world and promise people heavenly rewards if they will just suffer through now.

But that's not the kind of waiting that God's people do. The kind of waiting that God's people do is passionate and compassionate. It's alert, it's preparing, it's being ready and watchful for the presence and power of God. It's the kind of waiting that prays for God's kingdom to come and then gets about living as if it's already true.

And that's the Advent time we're in: A time of waiting and getting ready. Getting ready for the train that is coming. Getting ready for the world to be changed. And living as if we're already there.

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