

The Jesus of Advent in our “Ordinary” Days – Teresa Holden

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

A curious by-product of being someone who does historical research is that one becomes very well-acquainted with dead people. In fact, I can honestly say that there are some dead people whom I know more intimately than I know some of you living, breathing people who are sitting in front of me. Some of them I think of as friends, because I have spent so much time thinking about them, trying to figure out their quirks and the motivations that drove them. I want to use an example from doing historical research to help us think about today's Scriptures, which involve the prophecies of Jeremiah and of Jesus, prophecies that are both wonderful and unsettling. Before I continue, though, I want to point out that when I talk about my dead people friends, I'm not trying to be callous or cold by calling them “dead.” Since I never knew them as living people, their being dead is just a fact to me, and it's a rather insignificant fact. (What would be way more significant is if they were living because that would make most of these people over 150 years old. THAT would be significant.) But the fact of their being dead doesn't really interest me **because** I am interested in their lives, what they did during their time among the living. That's an important point that I will return to a little bit later.

A long time ago I started doing research on a woman named Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, about whom I have written a biography. You've probably never heard of her, hardly anyone has. She was a suffragist and civil rights advocate throughout her life which spanned from 1842-1924, and she lived her entire life in the same neighborhood in Boston, in an African American enclave on the back side of Beacon Hill, by the Massachusetts State House.

When I took my first research trip to Boston, my mother-in-law accompanied me, and we spent about six hours on a Saturday walking all over Beacon Hill. I was armed with all of the addresses I had found in 80 years' worth of city directories of where Josephine and her family and her husband's family had lived. What I hoped to gather from our hours of marching up and down the hill and through back alleys was to catch a glimpse of the Boston that Josephine knew. I wanted to chart that geographical terrain and figure out little but important things, like how far things were from each other, and how long it would take to walk from one spot to another. I was only partially successful at this endeavor of gaining a sense of Josephine's Boston. On the building where she, as a widow, had taken up residence in an apartment and edited her Woman's Era newspaper, there was a plaque on the building that linked its significance to her. That was cool. But the building had become a doggy bakery, where exotic dog treats were made. This sort of took away some of the historic ambiance. Many of the old homes in that neighborhood continue to remain at least partially intact, but when I found the address of where Josephine and her husband had lived and reared their children, it had been replaced with a firehouse.

Since this day had only partially satisfied my goals, I determined that the next day I would make the journey to Cambridge (where Harvard is) to seek the gravesite of Josephine and her husband. Her husband had died suddenly in the prime of his career as a lawyer, just having three years previously been appointed a municipal judge. As the first black man to graduate from Harvard's law school, he was also the first black man to serve as a judge in the United States above the Mason-Dixon line. Josephine and her husband were devoted to each other, and although she outlived him by almost forty years, she never remarried. I knew that at his grave, I would be in a location that she had stood, a place that was meaningful to her. So I got up early and took the subway to Harvard Square, and walked the mile and a half to Mt. Auburn Cemetery where the nice people in the office gave me a map. On the end of Indian Ridge path, about 100 yards down from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's tomb I found the grave of George Lewis Ruffin, Josephine's husband. The spot was shaded by a giant tree, and it overlooked a pond. I knew that this beautiful, peaceful setting would have brought some small amount of comfort to Josephine. I viewed the grave from every possible angle and took pictures. I imagined Josephine standing there, and I did feel that connection with her that I was looking for.

Before I left, I stopped back by the cemetery office, as the people working there had told me they would allow me to see the file that would give the history of that gravesite. I had no idea what would be in a file like that, but what I learned not only verified my hunch that Josephine had spent considerable time at this place, it also caused me to recognize that despite all of my research, my knowledge of her was still quite limited. From the file I learned that in the 38 years between the deaths of Josephine and her husband, she had buried four other family members there, none of whom had grave markers. These included her mother (who had lived with her through much of her married life), her son who died as young adult (one of two sons who died before her), and two grandbabies, each of whom were less than a week old. In a brief few minutes, I learned so much about Josephine, from this record that revealed what was hidden from view. Just looking at that grave I would never have guessed at this information. The ground hid the full story. Eventually, I would have found death certificates for all of these people, but with the information I received from this file, the reality of what Josephine's life had demanded of her was much more palpable to me. In the 38 years of living beyond her husband, Josephine started a major movement of African American women, one that still exists to this day. Sixty years before the 20th Century Civil Rights movement, she defied almost everyone she knew by calling for civil disobedience of American laws that were discriminatory, and in doing so, she contributed to the development of a whole new strain of activism in the African American community. Despite the heartbreak of her many losses and all the tears she shed at Mount Auburn cemetery and elsewhere, she just kept on living, so that people like me, today, are interested in her contributions.

Similar to my research experience, prophesy, in general seems like a sort of riddle that (in order to understand it) depends on having key facts available. To me, our Jeremiah passage seems obviously to be referring to Jesus as "the righteous Branch." Since the Lectionary appoints this passage to this day, the first Sunday of Advent, it seems like that is a common interpretation. But as I dug into some commentaries, I learned that we sort of superimpose that meaning on

this passage because in its literal sense, it refers to the city of Jerusalem itself and to the succession of human kings and priests who will rule over Jerusalem. One commentary attributes these dual interpretations (the one recognized by Christians today and other embedded in the language of the Scripture) – they attribute these differences to the fact that language is limited to the timeframe in which it is used. Since it would be impossible for the Jewish people to understand a time when the sacrifice of animals wouldn't be necessary, the way in which the prophet Jeremiah said things had to match the level of understanding of the people who lived at that time. For us today, this gets really complicated.

The Lectionary only makes things more complicated by giving us this Luke passage in which Jesus prophesies about the end time. (This week I've begun to wonder whether the creators of the Lectionary were aware that there would be so much hub bub right now about the apparent prediction by the Mayans of the apocalypse on December 21.) Anyway, today we aren't assigned the warm and fuzzy Baby being born in a manger with archangels singing overhead that gives us a sense of warmth in the dark of our winter nights. No, we have "people [fainting] from fear, [feeling] foreboding about what is coming on the world," along with "the powers of Heaven" (our very anchor) "[being] shaken."

So what are the clues that allow us to view the hidden meaning in these prophecies? How can we look beneath the surface to understand them? Understanding the context of the book of Jeremiah can provide some powerful insight. The passage we read today is actually an add-on to this book, added after much of what Jeremiah had already prophesied earlier in the book had begun to happen. Earlier in the book, Jeremiah foretold that Judah would be destroyed by the Babylonians. There were two reasons for this destruction – first, the Jews had not been faithful to worship God, Yahweh, as the one true God who had been revealed to them in so many ways. They had followed the lead of neighboring ethnic groups, and they had adopted other gods along with Yahweh. Second, the Jewish people had not committed themselves to practicing justice; they had not kept in mind the lowly, nor had they considered the poor. Jeremiah 2:34 says "On your clothes is found the lifeblood of the innocent poor, though you did not catch them breaking in." In chapter 5, verse 28 Jeremiah describes the Jewish people like this: "Their evil deeds have no limit; they do not seek justice. They do not promote the case of the fatherless; they do not defend the just cause of the poor." The Jewish peoples' lack of tending to basic tenets of the faith is what got them in trouble. The God of Israel demanded sole devotion to Yahweh and compassionate justice for all, even those who lacked power and could not demand justice for themselves.

Old Testament Scholar Amy Erickson points out the fact that the Jeremiah verses assigned to us today describe a renewal that is coming, that will follow all of this destruction. She describes what is to follow in this way: "The images of life-after-disaster are not overblown with glitter and diamonds and champagne. Instead Jeremiah casts a scene of normal everyday life. In the midst of chaos, memories of the regular rhythms of life take on new significance and new beauty." So once the Jewish people turned back to God, and justice (that included compassion for the poor) was restored, the glorious everyday would be welcomed back.

Our passage in Luke is preceded by Jesus foretelling the destruction of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem, an event that would take place a short 35 or so years after Jesus' death and resurrection. But our verses for today focus on a different occasion, an apocalyptic event, one that still sounds apocalyptically scary, despite all of the rotten, horrible things the world has seen in the intervening 2,000 years. So what are we to do with this, today, on the first Sunday of Advent, 2012?

I would like to return to my description of my dead friends at the beginning of this talk, that what is most important to me is what they did when they were living. Similarly, Jesus suggests that at that apocalyptic moment when "heaven and earth will pass away" what will actually be most important will be whether we have been vigilant during our ordinary days. Jesus instructs us to "Be on guard so that [our] hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, [so] that day [catches us] unexpectedly." The book of Jeremiah suggests that what God really wants from us is found in our ordinary, normal everyday actions that reveal our love for God and our commitment to those around us. Whether we will be present on earth for the apocalypse, we have no way of knowing, but our actions that show reverence for God's word will always be found to be true and will remain forever.

When Ben asked me to speak today and I realized it was the first Sunday of Advent, I said "of course, who wouldn't want to speak on the first Sunday of Advent?" This message, however, seems to be much more of an "ordinary time" kind of message. It demonstrates the tension we live with all of our lives as we exist between the wonderful celebration of the gift of Jesus and our very mundane struggle to consistently pursue the path God has set before us. Even without the anticipation of the apocalypse overshadowing us, each of us has unique challenges that can be barriers to our consistent faithfulness. I Thessalonians 3:13 points out that our struggle is one that we can't bear alone, but rather we must rely on God. We have to have faith. Verse 13 says – "And may the Lord so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints." We have to overcome our tendency to doubt, and rather believe and that will provide us with the strength to pursue our path.

May we be so strengthened in holiness that our everyday living vitally influences the world around us in ways that are good, full of love, just and that reflect our Savior, Jesus Christ.