

Sunday December 1, 2024

Advent 1

Luke 21:25-36

Today is the first Sunday in a new church liturgical year and so Advent 1. Advent means arrival or appearing. It is interesting then that the first thing the church in a new year says is not, "Remember those stories about Jesus being born all those years ago" (ie backwards looking) but "Watch, Keep awake, reach out and long for the coming of the Lord, anticipate and prepare, for surely he comes". (ie forward looking). This tells us once again that our basic stance as Christians is looking forward, not back, and the only reason we look back is to reorient ourselves for another forward surge.

So Advent is preparing for comings (plural) of the Lord. Past – the incarnation – Christmas, human birth and life and death and resurrection of Jesus, presence with his people now in the power of the Holy Spirit, and the future coming of the Lord in glory. Sometimes also called the Second Coming. And that is something mainstream church feels, frankly, a bit uncomfortable with. We read some of the bizarre (apocalyptic) passages in the bible about the return of the Lord and we are unsure how to make sense. Is it literal or metaphoric? Becomes playground for all sorts of weird end of time cults.

There are a number of sections of the bible, both in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the gospels that are written in what is called apocalyptic language.

Epiphanies, however, are usually welcome and described in positive terms: a flash of brilliance, a ray of light, the turning on of a lamp or a lightbulb, the parting of clouds. Apocalypses, on the other hand, are described cataclysmically: "it was a bolt of lightning out of the blue," "my head exploded," "it blew my mind," "it hit me like a ton of bricks," "it is a day of darkness and deep gloom." Thus, we get that secondary, catastrophic, end-of-the-world understanding.

Apocalyptic language is both fearful but hopeful. Hopeful because while it has given up on human governments ever become just in their own power it says, there is an end to evil, injustice is not forever, and things will be straightened

out once and for all. It won't be pretty, it won't be easy, but it will come to pass. God is in control. Therefore, do not be dismayed by the success of the wicked, much less secretly hope to enjoy that success for yourselves. Don't be alarmed by the violent domination of the vulnerable by the strong, much less secretly covet their power. Don't be distressed by the sleek lives of the rich, much less envy their hoarded possessions. They will not always come out on top. The victim will not always be victimized. A glorious reversal of fortune for the innocent, the poor and the weak is in the cards. You will see it! Hope, and keep on hoping. Wait, and keep on waiting. Be alert, make room in your spirit for the Holy, and stay that way.

This time of the year is about preparing. Getting ready. And as we are waiting for the return of the Lord, we are to be astute readers of the meaning of the signs around us. What are these major events pointing to? What sort of signs might have the massive global impact such as we read about in our gospel? Climate change? Terrorism? What may the message of these signs be?

Advent also teaches us something about waiting. Waiting. Waiting for the future return of the Lord in glory. Modern people don't like waiting. Oh how hairpulling out frustrating is it when you get caught at a red light. Could be a minute. 20 minutes on hold waiting for the bank to answer, but hearing repeatedly how important to them my call was, My wife and I were booking our flights to Laos and we came across one that seemed a very good price, much cheaper than many of the other ones – what was the catch we thought to each other and then we spotted it. On this flight we would be waiting at Bangkok airport for 8 hours for the connection on to Laos. And so we did what the privileged can do – we bought our way to the head of the queue and paid full fare. Isn't that what medical insurance does... no waiting.... Obliterate any waiting...

But different types of waiting. Waiting expectantly for exciting, pleasing things. To go to a party or see a concert or a holiday. Or the frustrating, anxiety filled waiting. For medical tests to come back, for the plumber to turn up, for the insurance claim to come through.

There is another sort of waiting going on today.

Today in our texts we are dealing with the waiting for the presence of God. We suggest this period of waiting and preparation in the fact that we light just one

candle today and add another each week during Advent. The pressures of society would demand that we light all four in one go and be done with it! Who wants to drag something out over four weeks?

And this waiting for the return of the Lord by the first Christian communities was by people who are under pressure, who are persecuted or unsure of their future. They had thought they were literally in the last days. After Jesus resurrection and ascension he was supposed to return in glory to gather all the faithful to himself and wrap up worldly history. It did not happen that way. And people are waiting for it to happen, and waiting, and waiting. And some are dying, and some are weary with waiting, and in the face of persecution some wander back to their old occupations and ways of living and faith is sorely tried

In Luke's gospel the persecuted fledgling Christian community gathers around the words of Jesus' teaching about how it would be tough, this period of the absence of the Lord that seems to suck the soul out of time; but keep alive the hope for surely the Lord is not far away. In frankly bizaree nightmarish language Jesus talks of the heavens thrown off their orbit, violent images of storms and destruction upon the face of the oceans and earth. Creation in travail, nature and humans alike in distress. Our destiny and that of creation intimately inextricably tied. Through it all he urges his people to keep faithful, keep trusting. Stand up, have the courage to stand before the Lord. Not cowering in fear. Keep awake, stay alert for in falling asleep you may miss his coming". We in the church are on about a message of wait, watch, be alert at precisely the same time as the world is getting a thorough head of steam up on the most materialistic onslaught of spending spree through December. We actually say it is good to develop a hunger, a hunger for God that will produce a dissatisfaction with the present situation in the world.

Which makes us disconnected with the prevailing culture in our experience of Advent. The whole culture around us is saying, "Christmas, Christmas, get ready for Christmas," while the scripture lessons are saying, "the Second Coming, get ready for the Second Coming." we are in between. We feel ourselves in between. We have loyalties and attachments to where we are now, to the world as we know it, the round of seasons and parties and shopping and business, we find some satisfaction in these things, and yet we feel a yearning and longing for something deeper, something much more satisfactory. We feel unsettled, a restlessness, a discontent - as we should. Recognize your discontent as yearning and longing, and this yearning and longing has been planted in us by the Holy Spirit. It is a gift of grace, to keep us from being trapped within the world that's too much with us. Reach out, reach out to touch this discontent. Receive it, take it into yourself for it means a part of you already inhabits the kingdom that is coming and is still to come.

At the end of all this we are left saying frankly we know precious little of the future. Our end as individuals will come within 50-60 years for most of us – some sooner, some much sooner. As for the end of the world; we have no idea. And it is none of our business to get caught up in dates, timelines. That is to get distracted, and ironically becomes a form of falling asleep in terms of the teaching in the gospel. Our call is to be found living faithfully when that time comes.

“Learn the lesson of the fig tree,” says Jesus.^[13] Those signs may be as simple, and as small and sometimes unnoticed, as the bud of a leaf on a tree in spring. Simple and small as they may be, look for them. For when you see them, Christ is “near, at the very gates;”^[14] not just coming, but already arrived. Keep alert for those everyday apocalypses that are drawing back the curtain obscuring both your need to be doing things and the presence of the Lord in your life.