

1 Advent

Sermon for November 28, 2021

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Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church

Los Alamos, New Mexico

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Psalms 25:1-9

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Luke 21:25-36

Welcome to Advent, the church New Year.

At this point we switch to the next set of Gospel readings both in the Sunday and Daily lectionaries.

We're now in Year C for Sundays and Year 2 for the daily readings.

Last year we read from the Gospel according to Mark, and this year we read from the Gospel of Luke.

These are Cosmic seasons for the church.

For the four Sundays of Advent we will be waiting, wondering, pondering what is to come – not just the nativity, but also the second coming.

And Christmas is such a cosmic event – when God actually becomes human.

And of course, Epiphany,

when the stars tell the story of the King born in a manger.

Such cosmic events, and that becomes apparent in today's gospel reading:

“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.”

It's like the opening for a sci fi horror movie about the end of the world.

And that's where we enter the Gospel of Luke – all the way back in chapter 21.

We jump in with both feet – not in the beginning or even the middle, but close to the end.

"Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

After today's reading,  
we go straight into the betrayal and arrest of Jesus, the trial and the crucifixion.

Whoa! That's moving way too fast,  
we need a chance to work our way into the story.  
But we don't get it. This is Advent.  
Time to fasten your seat belt and hang on because,  
God help us, we're in for a ride.

"Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud'  
with power and great glory."

We sang about that in the opening hymn: "Lo, he comes on clouds of glory."  
The words give us all the meaning gift wrapped into Advent,  
because it's not about getting ready for Christmas,  
it's about getting prepared for the end.

Advent was not a season I grew up with in the church I was raised in.  
In fact, the only seasons I remember we celebrated were Christmas and Easter,  
and mostly there was church on Easter but rarely was there church on Christmas.  
Everyone was urged to stay home to celebrate the holiday with their families.  
It wasn't until I crossed over into my thirties and found the Episcopal Church  
that I discovered the beauty of Advent.

The timing of the Season of Advent changes a bit each year  
depending on how Christmas falls in the days of the week.  
The first Sunday of Advent is the fourth Sunday before Christmas.  
That tells us when it occurs, but not what or why.

Advent is a special time for those of us who observe it  
Because we look in two temporal directions simultaneously.

We gaze back in wonder at the events that heralded the birth of Jesus  
as we prepare to celebrate the Incarnation of God  
into human flesh at the Nativity of Jesus on Christmas.  
And We gaze forward in anticipation of the return of the Christ  
to judge the world as foretold in the Book of Revelation.

Advent juxtaposes two images:  
the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger  
and Christ descending from Heaven in clouds of glory to reign over the earth.

I grew up in a church that watched for the second coming, the end of days.  
My parents read the prophets of the end times  
like Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* and the *Left Behind* books.

In the church I was raised, the world and the Bible  
were seen through the lens of the Book of Revelation,  
where the prophecy of the Second Coming is propounded,  
and in which clues are sought to identify THE DAY.

And for many, the question was: "What are we supposed to do?"

I was raised on the end times. The end times are a part of my religious DNA.  
I remember a bumper sticker I once saw:  
"Jesus is coming! – Look Busy!"

Some look busy by spending a lot of time talking about the rapture,  
and charting the Book of Revelation to see what current world events  
match what they see as prophecies.  
They want to preach the end of days and write books about when that's happening, and  
they spend their time preaching and predicting the end of days.

It's a practice that dates back to the beginnings of the church.  
It still goes on. You can watch it happen on any religious TV channel.

They look busy by predicting the threat to Israel and Jerusalem.  
They look busy by talking about the activities of the Anti-Christ.  
They look busy by condemning others for their sins.  
They look busy and judging others for how they live.

They look busy.

But it is all appearances.  
They LOOK busy.

That's not the message Jesus has for us in our Gospel reading today.  
You see, Jesus starts out talking about the end,  
but then he tells us not to try to figure it out, but rather "Be Alert!"

"Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation  
and drunkenness and the worries of this life,  
and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap.  
For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth.  
Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these  
things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

Be Alert! That doesn't mean, don't go to sleep.  
It means keep active.  
So the question remains, "What are we supposed to do?"

And I would ask in return:  
Would it be better to sit and plot out the incidences of events  
and chart them to Scripture?  
Or would it be better to spend our time doing what Jesus has told us to do?  
The tasks we have been given in Matthew [25:31-40]:

Feed the hungry,  
clothe the naked,  
heal the sick,  
visit the prisoner,  
make welcome the stranger in the land.

We have been given the resources. As Paul writes:

"Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you.  
And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for  
all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he 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."

“May he so strengthen your hearts” so when the day that Jesus tell us of in the reading, the end times, will not find us wanting, but strong - strengthened so that together we “may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.”

That is our charge:  
work together in the here and now: Build the Kingdom of God.

That’s what Advent is about.  
This season reminds us what we are to be about the rest of the year:

As Jeremiah writes:

“In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: ‘The Lord is our righteousness.’”

It is so easy to forget what we’re about.  
We so easily forget that it is love that comes down to us this season  
and not fear and judgment.  
It is love that gestates in our hearts  
as we look forward to that miraculous birth.  
And it is love that surrounds us  
as we wait for the fulfillment of the promise  
that this life is not the end, but only the beginning.

Ultimately it doesn’t matter when the end times come for us all.  
We each meet the end in our own time.  
We just need to be ready to account for what we have done in our lives.  
And when the time comes, it should be an absolute surprise.

As it says in the Collect today:

“give us grace to cast away the works of darkness,  
and put on the armor of light,  
now in the time of this mortal life  
in which your son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility;  
that in the last day, when he shall come again in glorious majesty  
to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal.”

Amen.