

“Signs of Advent”
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1 Advent - November 29, 2009
Luke 21:25-36

Happy New Year! Don't worry; I haven't lost my mind. It's the first Sunday of Advent, the first day of the new year for the church, our own new year's day. So, Happy New Year!

How bout that Gospel, huh? Bet you didn't expect to hear that when you were getting ready to come to church today! People fainting from fear and foreboding, seas and waves roaring, distress among nations, shaking heavens. Sounds more like something out of the movie 2012 than a reading for the first Sunday of Advent. Didn't the lectionary writers know that Christmas was coming? What's with all the end of the world stuff?

Well, the truth is that Advent is a time of double waiting. It's a time when we're waiting for Jesus to be born in a manger in Bethlehem, but it's also a time when we're waiting for the Son of Man to come again. Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again. These are the words we say in one of our Eucharistic prayers. Christ will come again. Advent is a time to remind us that Christ is coming again in power and great glory. We don't know exactly what that means or what it will look like, but in today's Gospel, Jesus describes all these signs that will precede it.

It's hard to take all of that seriously. The people of Jesus' time thought that all these things would come to pass before they died. Clearly that didn't happen. Though Jesus might have been describing events surrounding the fall of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 A.D., he didn't return then to judge the world, and it doesn't appear that heaven and earth passed away, so he must have intended some other meaning. Who would have guessed that 2000 years later, we would still be waiting?

Waiting can lull us into thinking that because these events haven't happened yet, then they're not going to happen. I mean seriously, is Jesus really going to come back in my lifetime? It doesn't seem likely. So why should we be on guard or stay alert at all times, when it's so doubtful that we're going to experience Jesus' return? It's difficult to remain on alert at all times. It's also difficult to interpret the signs. We certainly have seen nations in distress and roaring seas and any number of signs that could be signaling the coming of the end times. And then again, Jesus' return could be many thousand years away.

So, on this first Sunday of Advent, how do we find something in this text that is a bit more concrete? Instead of tossing it away as one of those passages we don't like or fussing at the lectionary writers for not understanding that we wish to read something a little more palatable in the weeks before Christmas, we should dig a little deeper.

“Then Jesus told them a parable: ‘Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.’” So often Jesus uses simple examples to make his point. Look at the fig tree. Here at Hickory Neck instead of looking at fig trees, we could look at the crape myrtles outside our doors. In the spring we see the leaves unfurl, and we know that in a few short months summer will arrive and those crape myrtles will burst forth in glorious blooms. The signs are clear.

Those same crape myrtles are also a sign of the coming of Advent. They do not lose their leaves early in the fall but wait until November, when the days are shortening and the weather is turning cooler. They turn vivid yellow and orange and red, blazing forth in exquisite color just before falling off the branches in preparation for winter. They are one of our signs of Advent. So are the cooler temperatures, the long nights, the coming of All Saints’ Day and Thanksgiving. When these things happen, we know Advent is just around the corner. Even the Christmas carols playing in the stores and the displays of merchandise and decorations that the secular world insists on getting out too early are signs to us that Advent is coming.

Today it is here. What is this Advent that the signs have been pointing to? It is a time of waiting for the Christ child and the return of the Messiah. It is a time for repentance and preparation and anticipation. It is also the first day of the new year in the church calendar. What do we do on January 1? Well, lots of us make New Year’s resolutions.

What would it be like to make resolutions for the church's new year? Instead of resolving to lose weight or exercise more or take up a new hobby, what if, on the first day of Advent, we made resolutions about our spiritual lives? We could resolve to participate in a new ministry that interests us. We could resolve to do an outreach project this year. We could resolve to read morning prayer once a week or read a book of the Bible that we've never read. We could resolve to learn a new spiritual practice like centering prayer or walking the labyrinth or praying with prayer beads. We could resolve to spend more time listening to God instead of doing all the talking. We could resolve to return to a practice that has worked for us in the past but which we haven't made time for lately.

We could use this season of Advent as a time to take stock of our spiritual lives and determine what's missing. What do we need to bring us closer to God? (And if you need some help figuring that out, either Michael or I would be happy to meet with you for conversation about it.)

Some of us might need more contemplative time in our lives, time to fix our hearts on God. Some of us might need a little push to share the love of Jesus through our actions. Advent is the perfect time, right here at the closing of one year and the beginning of another, to consider how to prepare our hearts and souls for the coming of the Christ child and the coming of our risen Lord. It is the perfect time to do our part to prepare ourselves for the kingdom of heaven to break in at any moment.

As Jesus describes the signs by which we will know that his return is imminent, he suggests we be on guard and not let our hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life so that the last day doesn't catch us unexpectedly like a trap. The frenzy of the holiday season can catch us like a trap and prevent us from experiencing the double waiting of Advent. Resolving to take up new prayer practices or ministries or deepening the practices we already have is the way we keep alert, the way we keep a holy life as we wait.

The leaves have fallen off the crape myrtles, my friends. The turkey dinner is done, the shoppers are madly running about, and we are gathered together in worship. Advent is here! Happy New Year!

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