

First Sunday in Advent
Luke 21:25-36
December 2nd, 2018
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Jesus said, "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. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

Then he 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. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

"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."

Distressed nations, roaring seas and fainting people. Doesn't it just fill you with joyful anticipation? What a way to start the new year, eh? If Advent is just a run-up to Christmas, this may seem a strange way to start. "Hey, season's greetings! Creation is falling apart!"

And yet, if we allow Advent to be a season of its own, then this is an outstanding place to begin. In the dark. Listening to a text that captures our attention and keeps us from getting snagged by current events or wrapped around the axle about what to buy for Aunt Bertha.

If Advent is just a run-up to Christmas, then the candles on this wreath are just a timer marking the number of weeks we have left until Christmas. If we see Advent as its own time, we can see each additional candle that we light in Advent as a symbol of increasing illumination; a visual reminder of our trust that the Light of Christ is dispelling more and more of the darkness.

The ancient church gave each candle a name. Next week we will light the second candle, called "peace." The third candle, the pink candle, is called "joy." On the fourth Sunday, we will light "love," and, of course, at the Christ Mass, we will light the Christ candle.

The candle we lit today is called "hope." Finding the hope in this Gospel reading begins with a moment born in dark uncertainty. There is an important

clue in what Jesus says about that moment; a moment when people will faint away from fear and anticipation for what is coming.

Luke's Jesus says that they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. He is borrowing a specific reference from the Book of Daniel. In that mystical book of prophecy, the Son of Man, the Anointed one, is seen *coming to heaven* in a cloud. Jesus is telling his followers about a moment where he is united with that aspect of God's realm that transcends time.

Jesus is pointing out a mystical moment when the time-bound and the timeless intersect; a mystical moment when that which is created and subject to chance blends with that which is uncreated and eternal emptiness. It is *this* moment. And this one. And this.

Advent is the mystery of emptiness dancing with form; the relative frolicking with the absolute. "It must be so," Thomas Merton once said. "Otherwise it could not be a mystery of hope. The Advent mystery is a mystery of beginning," Merton went on, "but it is also the mystery of an end. The fullness of time is the end of all that was not yet fullness. It is the completion of all that was still incomplete, all that was still partial."

And so, whenever any of us wakes up to that mystical moment, becomes aware of the moment that is always already and always not yet, Jesus says this: "Stand up and lift up your heads, because your liberation draws near."

All the great religions and wisdom traditions portray humanity as border dwellers. That is to say, we all live in the threshold between the created and the Uncreated; between space and infinity; matter and spirit. The English mystic Evelyn Underhill suggested that the spiritual path involves first *noticing* what seems to be the double reality of human life.

And then our practices of prayer and our embrace of God's silent and loving darkness can begin to *harmonize* these realities in us; not as one thing only and not as two separate things. Instead, we begin to experience eternity and time working in and through us just as they work in and through Christ.

Advent. The word itself, like the season, involves the mystical interpenetration of what now exists and what is still to come. Our liturgy weaves past and present and future in the same way that the incarnation of the Word

of God took place 2,000 years ago and continues in this moment and is constantly just on the verge of coming again.

Our awareness of time changes in Advent. Time is no longer simply the endless march of one moment replacing another, causing it to slip away forever and then fading away itself to make room for the next mortally wounded moment to come.

Instead, if we are patient and still, we notice a moment – a moment that transcends and remains consistent even as the seas roar and the nations are distressed; we notice an ever-moving center that carries the past with it, preserves the present and gathers the future into itself.

This is the Advent moment that we celebrate with awe, with our hearts unburdened. This is the moment that we make ourselves ready to receive Christ, not just in a manger in Bethlehem, but in ourselves, in our lives, in our time.

“The Advent mystery in our own lives,” Thomas Merton wrote, “is the beginning of the end of all, in us, that is not yet Christ.”

During the Ash Wednesday service in Holy Week, the liturgy includes an “Invitation to the Observance of a Holy Lent.” In that season of reflection and repentance, we practice prayer, fasting and self-denial as preparation for the arrival of Pascha, the celebration of the Risen Christ.

Oddly, there is not a comparable invitation for the beginning of Advent.

And so, I will invite you this morning into the mystery of love that begins in the tender silence and darkness of God. This is the dark silence of the seed buried in the earth; the dark silence of the womb that ends with transition, not death; the birth of a new reality that drops away more of what is not yet Christ.

I invite you to rest and be nurtured in this holy and silent darkness with only the light of “hope” to calm you. The lights of “peace,” “joy” and “love” will follow. Until then, take care that your hearts do not become burdened with the anxieties of life. Remember that the light of your liberation draws near.

It is Advent. We’ve been given these four weeks to prepare ourselves to receive the incarnation of Christ. Soon we will chant the story of the Advent moment within and beyond all time: “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.” We have a glimpse of the complete fulfillment of the eternal mystical moment. Because, through our baptism, we have died and risen with

Christ. And Christ will come again within us. It is our birthright and God's desire for all people.

And it is our privilege, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to incarnate Christ in our own time. We hope for a future not as something unreal that is yet to come but rather as a future already in its perfection, still developing and yet to be born.

The powers of the heavens shake even now. Be alert at all times, praying for the strength to stand before the Son of Man.

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