



"The End and the Beginning"

a sermon by
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In our season of Wednesday worship we have been preaching from lessons in the ecumenical lectionary that are assigned for the following Sunday as the church year is shaped by those Sunday texts. That said, though it does not make it into our formal book of services that we publish for this season each year, this week will actually kick off our Advent season as this Sunday marks the first of four weeks dedicated to the coming of the Christchild. The text that we are provided is from Jesus' ministry and an unlikely one. It is from Luke 21:25-36 after he told his disciples that the temple in Jerusalem would one day fall, and just before his betrayal and arrest. Jesus is in the midst of a speech about how the destruction of Jerusalem has been prophesied, and how her inhabitants will suffer for a time and flee the city. He is speaking not just about matters that will occur in history, but also those that will take place at the end of time.

"(Jesus said to them) 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 does not 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."

When I think about Christmas, our text for today is not exactly what I like to ponder in my heart with a cup of cocoa on a cold winter's eve. The lectionary is sneaky like that, it invites us to think about seasons and ourselves in wonderfully unique ways. But why start off the Advent season with a discourse on the end of time? "People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world...Be on guard...so that that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap." He says. So of course, when we hear this a multitude of associations come to mind, none of which have anything to do with the Christ child. More often than not, when we hear this passage we tend to think of all of the end-time memorabilia that floats around the cesspool of our popular religious culture, begging the question about such things as the 'R' words that Presbyterians aren't supposed to say- 'Rapture' and 'Repentance.' So how, one might ask, is this supposed to beg the Christmas question?

I don't recall if I've shared this story with you before, but I will never forget the first time I ever really thought about the kind of end of times scenario that Jesus is describing here. I was a sophomore in college and my roommate and I had been driving back from a visit to Florida to see her family when our car broke down in the middle of nowhere on I-85. By the grace of God a tow truck happened to pass along as we sat in the pre-cell phone era on the side of the road, not a dollar to our name, wondering what to do next. We were towed to what I would later affectionately call the "Jesus Saves Truckstop"- named,

namely, because of the enormous "Jesus Saves" sign that stood on its roof- something that I took to be a good sign until I walked in and saw my first rapture mural depicting what I presumed to be this time that Jesus is referencing. When heaven and earth pass away and believers apparently are snatched out of cars and airplanes to stand before God while the others (who coincidentally were all the people who did not look exactly like me) were abandoned by their faithful friends to face some terrible demise. After 8 hours of waiting for a part to be delivered, a waitress finally took pity on our broke souls and handed us a tri-fold menu that, when opened, had a picture of our Lord right there in the middle- hands outstretched and gesturing (right) appetizers, and (left) desserts.

I did receive my first Christmas card this week, and there was certainly no rapture mural on the cover of it. Nothing even close. A Byzantine depiction of the virgin Mary, Joseph, and the wise men lifting their hands in praise and adoration of the gold-leaf crowned Christchild. *This* is what Christmas is supposed to look like. Advent is, after all, about beginnings, isn't it? Not the end. "Behold, I bring you good news of great joy, for unto you this day in the city of David a child is born..." "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations... People will faint in fear...when you see these things take place you know that the Kingdom of God is near." Why this now? Why do we have to think about these things when we are busy making preparations in our calendars, on our credit cards, and in the book-marked recipes for the season?

The term 'Advent' means "coming" or "arrival." And because it precedes Christmas in the church year, it is a common misconception that Advent is exclusively a time to get ready to celebrate the coming of a child at Bethlehem. But it is also equally, and some would argue primarily, intended to celebrate the second coming of Christ, when he will fulfill his final promise to one day return and bring an end to all that is contrary to the ways of God. The resurrection of Jesus is the first sign of this destruction of the powers of death, but the things he describes in our text are signs of the destruction of evil, sin, corruption, and brokenness that is still to come in him. In Advent we celebrate the birth of Christ and anticipate his crucifixion and resurrection that would defeat death and our souls, in the same way we wait for his return still today, and anticipate the act of grace and power that will redeem the world and all of creation that is still to come.¹

The first Sunday of Advent marks the beginning of a new church year. The lectionary begins a new cycle that will stretch for another 364 days until it begins anew again. So it is no accident that the beginning of the liturgical year takes our thinking to the very end of things. For, as one commentator puts it, "end" means not only the "end of time," but the central purpose or goal of creation. We are not aimlessly wandering in a wilderness, even though we may be tempted to think so. Rather, history is headed somewhere by direction (though not dictation) from God. It is necessary that the liturgical year begin with this focus on a central, holy intention; for otherwise the story of Jesus, which is about to be rehearsed from conception and birth to death and resurrection, may

¹Laurence Hall Stookey, *Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church*, Nashville, Abingdon, 1996, p. 121-122. Courtesy Rev. Susan MacDonald Roddey in her November 26, 2006, lesson on *Christ the King Sunday* at First Presbyterian Church.

seem less than what it is: the deliberate fulfilling of divine purpose, worked out through (history).”² It is only this understanding of this central purpose of God in history, the understanding of the fullness of Advent that the person of Christ is about someone who has been, who is, and who is still to come, that can save the story of Jesus and his Advent/coming from nostalgia for the past. For we anticipate a Savior whose reign on earth may have been inaugurated in a manger 2000 years ago but is still very much alive and well today, and who tells us that another day for his feet to tread this world is still to come.

Salvation has been won, but redemption is still to come. And aren't we waiting? We still long for “freedom from hunger, from war, from violence and from persecution. (We) await our redemption from what Luke calls the “fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world”.... As my former preaching professor James Kay once wrote, The message of Advent is not that everything is falling to pieces. We probably don't need Luke to tell us that. And certainly the message is not that God is in heaven and all is therefore well with the world. No. The message of Advent is that when heaven itself is spinning into oblivion, when every fixed star on the moral compass is wavering, when all hell is breaking loose on earth, “your redemption is drawing near.” “If current trends were predictors of the future, then death and dissolution would bring an end to every human heart and hope.” But the good news of Advent, the surprise that would be born in a manger, that would bring kings to their knees, that would break the shackles of sin that had held the people captive to death and despair when it looked as though all hope was lost, “is that we can never take our own projections more seriously than God's promises. When we least expect it and when there is no evidence for it, God's power comes into this godless world in ways the world itself could never predict or foresee.”³

As we are busy making preparations for the season, let us not forget Christ's word of preparation for our spirits too.... “Be on guard (he says) so that your hearts are not weighed down with a hangover and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth.” But as sure as the promise of the Christ child is the promise of peace even at the end of days. For those who know God's love know the one who is coming, whose power governs and guides all that we see and know, and who is deeply committed to revealing himself to us, and drawing us near to him. Even if it means that he will be born into poverty and hung on a cross. And so the Advent message of the angels, ‘do not be afraid’ is an apt one. For Christ the king has been born, surrounded by a multitude of heavenly hosts. And he will come again with power and great glory. So prepare indeed for his coming- “stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

²Ibid.

³James F. Kay, *The Christian Century*, 1997.