

Advent 1C 2018 Sermon

Luke 21:25-36

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."

It's the First Sunday of Advent. Christmas lights are beginning to show up around town, Christmas music is being played in the stores, and children everywhere are looking forward to Santa Claus. Overlooking Canon City at night, a bright star shines on the hill just beneath Skyline drive, with Wise Men approaching the stable where Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus are to be found.

And what about the Church? The Church today is reading a Gospel filled with images of the end of the world. "*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.'*" That's about as far from colored lights, Christmas trees, and Nativity scenes as you can get.

Now we *might* be tempted to think, "Why does the Church have to throw such a wet blanket over us on the first day of Advent!" But the fact of the matter is that the tradition of anticipating the Second Coming of Christ during the season of Advent is even older than the tradition of Christmas trees or Nativity Scenes. *Wikipedia* states: "For Christians, the season of Advent anticipates... the **three** comings of Christ: in the flesh in Bethlehem, in our hearts daily, and in glory at the end of time."¹

Of these three comings, I think our tendency is to *celebrate* the first, and *forget* the other two. To borrow words from Tom Stella, who led our Quiet Day yesterday, we focus on the history and neglect the mystery. Let's commemorate that event some 2000 years ago when Jesus was born in Bethlehem! **That's** what Advent is all about, is it not – anticipating that birth in Bethlehem? But the fact of the matter is that this is only *one-third* of the 3-fold coming of Christ which the Church celebrates and anticipates at Advent. The 17th-Century German mystic Angelus Silesius said, "Christ could be born a *thousand* times in Bethlehem – but all in vain until He is born in me." Is that not what our Christmas Carol says: "O holy Child of Bethlehem/Descend to us, we pray/Cast out our sin and enter in/Be born *in us* today."

Yesterday at our Quiet Day, Tom Stella mentioned "3 Christmases:" our cultural Christmas, with Santa Clause, ugly sweater parades, and "shop 'til you drop;" the *religious* Christmas, commemorating the birth of Jesus in history with our religious traditions – Advent wreaths, nativity scenes, Christmas carols, Christmas Eve Candlelight services, etc.; and finally, the *spiritual* Christmas, which that Christmas carol prays for: "Be born *in us today*." Now the religious Christmas can sometimes *support* the spiritual Christmas (which is the **point** of our religious Christmas practices), but it can also work at cross purposes to the spiritual Christmas – if we focus *only* on the outer symbols: the beautiful poinsettias, the nativity scenes, the candlelight service, the music, etc. We need to be conscious of the fact that these outer rituals are there to help "every heart prepare Him room," as another carol puts it. That's why we always have Advent devotional booklets available – to help us in the discipline of preparing room in our hearts; and why I hope that our Advent Quiet Day will become an annual event.

Of the three-fold coming of Christ, then, we **all** observe the first coming – celebrating the historical birth of Jesus in Bethlehem; and *some* of us – usually with some intentional practice like reading Scripture or devotionals or disciplined prayer and awareness – some of us can get to where we observe the coming of Christ daily in our hearts. But what about this *last* coming – Christ's coming at the end of the world, which is the theme of our Gospel this first Sunday in Advent (and the theme of some of our hymns today)? If you are at all like me, this *last* "coming of Christ" is much harder to understand and appreciate. Yet I have recently come to realize that Christ's coming at the end of the world can be seen as a clarion call for compassion. Allow me to quote at length professor and preacher Cornelius Plantinga, who writes:²

"According to [today's] gospel..., everything breaks loose at the return of Jesus Christ. Nations go to war, and civilians run for cover. There's blood in the streets and famine in the fields. The earth shakes and the sea roars. There are signs in the sky above, panic on the earth beneath, stars falling, people dying of fright..."

“And then, in the midst of all the confusion, people will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.’ ...

“It’s the climax of the human drama. Christ coming to finish what he started....

“So why does [this] make some of us squirm? What is it about this topic that makes us uneasy?

“[One] ...problem is that the church has been expecting Jesus to return for a long time, and he hasn’t done it yet. ‘It’s hard to stand on tiptoe for two thousand years’ [William Willimon], and so after a while people settle... into a kind of ‘everydayness in their faith,’ and they quit scanning the horizon.

“But is it better to ignore the Lord’s return? Is it better to live with a low ceiling over our lives, and no room there for the incoming Lord?

“...Watch! says Jesus. Be alert! Jesus says this because his return isn’t an apocalyptic fireworks display. His return is the coming of the kingdom of God [in its fullness]. It’s the coming of justice in the earth.... ‘When these things begin to take place,’ Jesus says, ‘stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.’

“[And here’s the thing:] Jesus is talking to people who *know* about redemption... [They] have a history of being squeezed by Egypt, Babylon and Rome. To these people, redemption is the longing of their heart. They want Rome off their back. They want Caesar out of their hair. It’s their dream. It’s their passion. The coming of God’s redemption means justice is coming, liberation is coming, the King of all the earth is coming... [“O come, O come Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel that mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear!”]

“Do **we** know *anything* about such passion? I’m thinking that when life is good, our prayers for the kingdom get a little faint... ‘Thy kingdom come,’ we pray... ‘but not right away.’

“When our **own** kingdom has had a good year we aren’t necessarily *looking* for **God’s** kingdom. When life is good, redemption doesn’t sound so good. That’s how things go. God’s redemption is *good* news for people whose **life** is *bad* news. If you are a slave in Pharaoh’s Egypt, or a slave in antebellum Mississippi, you **want** your redemption. If you are an Israelite exiled in Babylon, or [if you are a refugee fleeing war in Syria, violence and poverty in Honduras or El Salvador, famine in Yemen], you **want** your redemption.

“According to scripture, the person who wants redemption wants the *kingdom of God* whether she knows it or not. And the coming of the kingdom [in its fullness] depends on [the one who is “coming again with power and great glory,” as our Rite I Eucharistic Prayer will say today]. However we are to understand this

apocalyptic event, whatever form it takes, the second coming of Jesus Christ means to a Christian that God's righteousness will at last fill the earth.

"People with crummy lives want it to happen *now*. If you are a Christian in [parts of] sub-Saharan Africa today [beset by religious persecution, famine, and violence], you don't yawn when somebody mentions the return of Jesus Christ... You **want** the one who has healing in his wings. Passionate Christians **want** the return of the Lord. And so do *comp*passionate ones.

"When our **own** life is sweet, we can look across the world to lives that aren't sweet. We can raise our heads and our hopes for *those* lives. We can weep with those who weep and hope with those who hope. We can look across the world, [and across the street,... and across the pew. It's natural to hope for ourselves, and [healthy to do so]. But it's *unnatural* to hope *only* for ourselves. And how *parochial* it is to do so.

"Be on guard, says Jesus, that you don't get weighed down with parochial anxieties and parochial amusements to relieve them. Be on guard against that fatal absorption with yourself! Take care! Stay alert! 'Stand up and raise your heads because the kingdom is coming.'

"Jesus's words are an antidote to our sloth, an antidote to our worldly cynicism... Jesus's words are meant to raise our heads and raise our hopes. Could justice really come to the earth?... Could [Benjamin Netanyahu and Mahmoud Abbas] look into each other's eyes and see a brother [and finally bring peace to the Holy Land]? Could some of us who struggle with addictions or with diseases that trap us—could **we** be liberated by God and start to walk tall in the kingdom of God?...

"If we believe in the kingdom of God we will *pray*, and we will *hope* for those **without** much hope left...

"[H]oping for others is hard... Praying for others is hard... [But] the hardest part for people who believe in the second coming of Jesus Christ is in 'living the sort of life that makes people say, "Ah, so **that's** how people are going to live when righteousness [and compassion] take over our world.'"

"The hardest part is simple faithfulness in our work and in our attitudes—the kind of faithfulness that shows we are being drawn forward by the magnetic force of the kingdom of God."

AMEN

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Advent>

² <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/interim> Cornelius Plantinga preached this sermon at St. Olaf College in the summer of 2000.