

Advent 1C 2021 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."

You know the story of Creation at the beginning of the Bible. Before God created the world, “darkness hovered over the face of the deep” – or as one translation puts it, “The raging ocean that covered everything was engulfed in total darkness.” (*Gen1:2, TEV*) The ancient Hebrews – Abraham and his descendants – were shepherders, tied to the dry land. To them, the ocean was an unknown and terrifying power. It symbolized for them the Chaos that existed *before* the world was made. In creating the world, God had to make *order* out of the Chaos. So, God formed a dome – the sky – to separate the waters above (from whence comes rain) from the waters below (the oceans); and God made dry land – a safe place for humans to inhabit. Then God placed lights in the sky – the sun, the moon, the stars.

This is the backdrop for today’s Gospel story, wherein Jesus says, “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.”

Sun, moon, stars, sea – Creation itself, *shaken!* Creation being undone.

Now, as you know, some Christians have taken Jesus’ words and interpreted them literally. Down through the centuries, there have been those who have predicted *when* the “end of the world” would occur – down to the very date and time. Yet predicted dates have come and gone, and we are still here.

But what if, in today’s Gospel, Jesus isn’t speaking *literally*, at all? What if he is talking about the all-too-real human tragedies that shake the foundations of our world and **feel** to us as though Creation itself is being undone? The sudden and unexpected death of a loved one. Or a

pandemic that strikes the earth and changes all that we had assumed was normal. These experiences can **feel** like the world is coming apart.

My friends, I confess that I have never *really* understood this passage – and others like it in the Gospels – until these past two years, when **I** – and perhaps you – have felt that the very foundations of the world as we have known it have been shaken. COVID-19 has taken the lives of over 5 million people in our world, over 777,000 lives in our own United States of America (including people we have known, members of our own parish family). I have watched the Fremont County Health Department website as the numbers of daily cases of COVID have increased 10-fold over the past 2 months and someone dies from COVID in Fremont County almost each day. Our nation has incurred trillions of dollars in hospital and other medical expenses in treating this disease.

The very structures of our society have been upended these past two years. Countless companies have gone bankrupt, and jobs have been lost. Mental health has suffered, particularly among frontline medical workers. It has become more and more difficult to receive timely medical care, as I recently discovered when I had a gallbladder attack and was told that it would take 8 days before I could schedule an ultrasound at St. Thomas More hospital.

The landscape of the workplace has changed, with more people working remotely. We shop more online, meet more online, worship more online, spend more time online.

And, *tragically*, the pandemic has caused divisions within our society, our nation, our county, our community. Bonds of affection have even been strained within families and churches as we struggle with differing perspectives regarding the dangers of exposure to the virus, wearing masks and distancing, where our freedoms can or cannot be restricted for the sake of the health and wellbeing of our society and our communities as a whole. In some cases, anger and rage have reached such proportions that flight attendants on airplanes are attacked, and death threats are made against public health officials and leaders of other organizations who are simply making decisions on the basis of what they, to the best of their knowledge and understanding, judge to be best for the health and wellbeing of the whole.

My friends, if these things, put together, don't sound like the kind of world-wide upheaval that Jesus symbolically describes in our Gospel – distress among nations, Creation itself falling apart – if the state of our world today doesn't sound like the cosmic upheaval Jesus describes in today's Gospel, then I don't know what does. Never before have I entered an Advent Season more ready to cry out, "O come, O come Emmanuel!" Emmanuel, which means: "God with us." Come, O God, and be with us in the midst of this world-shaking pandemic, in the midst of sickness, death, and divisiveness!

And here's the thing: Jesus, in today's Gospel, tells us that when all of these world-upending things are happening, and it looks like God's ordered Creation is coming apart at the seams, it is in the midst of just such times as these that we are able to **see** "the Son of Man coming in a cloud" with power and great glory, and *know* our redemption is near, the kingdom of God is at hand.

The Son of Man comes, not out of the crystal-clear blue sky, but “in a cloud.” When the world is enveloped in a cloud.

Scholar Cornelius Plantinga writes: “When our **own** kingdom has had a good year we aren’t necessarily *looking* for **God’s** kingdom.”¹ After all, we know that in the Kingdom of God, we are supposed to turn the other cheek, love our enemies, lose our life if we want to save it. That doesn’t sound terribly appealing when our *own* kingdom is working just fine, thank you very much. It is when our *own* kingdom is falling apart that we yearn for **God’s** kingdom, which we know, deep in our bones, is eternal and unshakeable, and which alone is Real. It is when our *own* kingdom has been turned upside down that our eyes are able to see the Son of Man coming in the midst of the clouds, and realize that the Kingdom of God **is** at hand – and always has been, unseen, unnoticed.

At this time when “*our* kingdom,” the kingdom of *this* world, is in such upheaval, some of us may be tempted to see “salvation” as an escape from our present. Perhaps, for us, “salvation” means going back to the past, to “the way things were,” to “better times.” **I** certainly see such inclinations and desires within myself! For other Christians, “salvation” means “making it into heaven” after they die, sometime in the future. And yet, as theologian H. Richard Niebuhr said, “eternity is less the action of God *before* time or the life **with** God *after* time than it is the presence of God *in* time. Eternal life is a quality of existence as we” live out our lives here and now.² Eternal life is a quality of existence, characterized by love, compassion, self-giving, as we live out our lives here and now.

My friends, we cannot live yesterday, and we cannot live tomorrow; we can only live now, in God’s eternal now. In the **midst** of this pandemic. In the **midst** of our divisiveness and disagreements. In the **midst** of unprecedented changes and uncertainties.

John Van de Laar writes: “Advent reminds us that in the midst of our daily struggles and victories, there is another reality at work, one that, if we remain aware and connected to it, will fill every detail of our lives with greater meaning & purpose. As we enter this season, we are called to watch, and to look for the signs of **God’s** reign around us, and then to co-operate with those signs, calling them into the light, and offering **our** love and strength to make God’s reign even *more* visible in our families, churches, and communities.”³

This Advent, my friends, may we look for the coming of the Son of Man **in** the very clouds that overshadow our world. May we stand up and raise our heads, because our redemption, our healing, the very incarnation of the Spirit of God among and within us, is here.

O come, O come, Emmanuel!

AMEN

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

2 Willie Dwayne Francois III, *The Christian Century*, November 17, 2021 issue

3 <https://sacredise.com/advent-sunday-c/>