

1st Sunday of Advent
Sermon 12.2.18
Scripture:

Jeremiah 33:14-16

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ¹⁵ In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ¹⁶ In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness."

Luke 21:25-36

"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. ²⁶ People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷ Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. ²⁸ Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." ²⁹ Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; ³⁰ as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. ³¹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³² Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. ³³ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. ³⁴ "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, ³⁵ like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶ 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."

Happy New Year! That's what this is — this Sunday, the first Sunday of the new church year. Now's when we begin again this adventure that is the liturgical year. This year, following the gospel of Luke, is the third in the three-year cycle — and, yes, it should be an adventure, beginning as it does with Advent.

It's a funny season, Advent. Four weeks long, it's a short season, the shortest one in fact. But it encompasses lots of time, and in reverse order oddly enough. It begins with a look toward the end — Jesus in the final days of his life looking toward a future revelation, perhaps even the final revelation, a coming of the so-called Son of Man amidst signs (in nature and in politics) and amidst the people who are all full of fear and foreboding and with the promise of redemption now drawn near. Then, for the 2nd and 3rd weeks, we find ourselves a few years back in time, with the emergence of John the Baptiser, when Jesus was already grown and would soon seek baptism from his cousin. The final Sunday of the season will have us where we might have expected to be all along, with Mary, who was pregnant with Jesus, now visiting her cousin Elizabeth who was pregnant with John — actually getting ready for actual

Christmas! Advent: it's not what you might expect, and it can be more than a little disorienting.

Add to that this further wrinkle in time, that Jesus is imagined as foretelling a cataclysmic set of events, but is written of having foretold this amidst that same set of cataclysmic events. "Luke" likely wrote this book in or around the year 85—which is to say fifty years or so after Jesus' death and resurrection, forty years or so after Paul traveled the Mediterranean world to establish the church, and twenty years or so after Rome finally declared war on the Jews (which would have included Jewish-Christians), attacked the city of Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple, and ushered in a mindset of the sort Jesus suspected the people would adopt: what on earth is going on? The historical moment Luke wrote from is also the moment Luke imagined Jesus foretelling. And maybe Jesus did foretell this very thing. Or maybe Luke found himself amidst a cataclysmic set of events and realized anew the timelessness of Jesus' promise as made in his very presence among us, his promise that it's amidst cataclysm when God's faithfulness is to be especially felt and known.

For none of this will last. Jesus could say that in the year 30 and have it be true. And Luke could say it in the year 80 and have it be true. We can say it in the year 2018 and have it be true: none of this is forever, established as never to be moved. None of this will last—neither the state we're each in personally nor the state we're all in collectively. None of this will stand forever, but God. So when it all comes apart, or yet begins its undoing, what will hold us will be God.

I remember the first time I realized this—the impermanence of things. My dad had a map collection, most from his decades long subscribing to *National Geographic Magazine*. I used to sift through them from time to time, choose one at random to unfold and study. Once, it was a political map of Africa and I was maybe eight years. I must have commented on something I saw, like Rhodesia, the colonial era name for Zambia.

Dad dismissed this lightly, likely said off the cuff while doing something else, "Huh, that doesn't even exist anymore."

"What?" would have been my unnerved reply. Of course, the end of colonial era Rhodesia was likely good news to most on the ground in Zambia, but it freaked me out. How could something as fundamental as a landed country cease to exist?

I was actually thinking about this not long ago. At a clergy gathering, it was an ice-breaking exercise: think of a time when you realized the impermanence of things, a question that was supposed induce wonder, but didn't for me. My first response to the impermanence of things is deep, infantile anxiety.

Which is likely why I've preached on this passage during previous first Sundays of Advent during Year C as if it were your typical apocalyptic passage. That's how Advent begins, of course, every year in apocalyptic, every year in a state in which all the illusions of the known world have been stripped away, a state or revelation that what endures when all of the constructs we've built have collapsed or exploded—an apocalypse that reveals either that nothing endures (the nihil) or that love does. This is the state in which Advent begins. I know this from years of experience, so I've unfurled the usual considerations about that.

And, yes, Mark's "Little Apocalypse" by which the church year begins Year B is hair-raising, a tearing back of the veil of civility and civilization.

Likewise, yes, Matthew's start of Advent would have us thinking in terms of a thief breaking into your house that you must urgently, urgently stay awake and keep watch.

Same here, to a degree. Be alert. Be on guard. But for what? Because Luke doesn't imagine quite that same in-breaking threat. Luke imagines rather a day that will come upon the whole face of the earth, which will amount to redemption drawing near. Redemption—that moment, or that process, by which God fulfills all purpose and promise in every single thing. Redemption—the moment, or process, by which the value of all things amidst the creation are re-deemed, re-evaluated, and thus revealed as not mere waste, useless or meaningless or bound for hell, but as full of import, full of God's promise now fulfilled.

You know, to be honest, I look at this passage now, after having spent the week with it, and I find it all strangely un-compelling—which isn't to say uninteresting, just *uncompelling*, like it has little to say to me or to us as to what we are compelled now to do but wait, keep watch, stay sober, and pray that we have the strength to stand before the redeeming Son of Man, the strength to withstand this moment or promise of redemption by which the essential value of each and all is revealed and realized.

And I suppose that does take some withstanding, some resilience, some strength. To understand the urgent value of every moment, every creature, every unfolding of every event: who can do this? Annie Dillard wrote in *The Writing Life*, "How we spend our days is, of

course, how we spend our lives,” a thing that, since I first read it twenty-five years ago, has in turn inspired me and haunted me. “How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives. What we do with this hour, and that one, is what we are doing.” I hated the thought of wasting time. I hated the thought of my life slipping away while I did whatever was the equivalent then of surfing the Internet. But every once in a while, this felt like it was breaking me — getting whipped while I was trying to sleep.

This is what Advent is largely about, and this is promising and menacing enough.

This is the calculus Luke seems to have engaged in. Or maybe not. Maybe it’s just his lovely style. And it is lovely, elegant. “Luke” is certainly the most elegant of our three synoptic gospel writers. (Not that that’s saying much. I always imagine Mark as writing with a broken pen, snapped under the pressure of his own hand.) What’s more as regards Luke, he imagined Jesus as a somewhat elegant figure, not the furious figure Mark imagined (he whose presence would have immediate effect amidst this world otherwise occupied by unholiness) and not the corrective figure of Matthew’s imagining (he whose mission was to fulfill the Scriptures as correction for the people having betrayed the Scriptures). No, “Luke” seems to delight in the details of Jesus’ life as if this loveliness and beauty are largely the point, even including details that are but embellishments.

They beg the question, what sort of story is being reported here? In this, our dangerous era of fake news purporting as fact and even outright deceptions that are demonstrably untrue and yet denied to be so, the poetic suggestions of scripture are something else, requiring of some other mindset. These items aren’t faith-based propaganda, as skeptics might suppose. And they’re not historic fact, as biblical literalists will demand. No, these are something else, embellishments, though that are rich with implication, rich for their being enduringly true even if not historically factual.

Given all this, Luke’s understanding of who Jesus was and what he was up to is a most pacifying one. Look, even in telling of cataclysm, there’s something strangely unthreatening about it all — and come to think of it, this might be just what we need.

There’s so much these days to have us compelled into some sort of reaction. There’s so much that seems apocalyptic, which is to say revealing, and also compelling of some sort of urgent, even knee-jerk response. I feel like I’ve been operating on a level of fury that is either prophetic in its righteousness or insufferable in its arrogance, not to mention troubling in its

faithlessness. Everything makes me angry, from the news of the world to the struggles of so many I hold dear. “Do something! *Do* something!” has been my go-to reaction to all turns of events great and small. But here’s what Jesus has in mind according to Luke as to what we’re to do this morning at least: “Keep watch and read the signs. Be on guard, though not weighted down and not worried. Be alert, stay sober, and pray to have the strength to stand before the Son of Man, who comes to redeem every little thing, every twist and turn in this pinball existence, every fiery intent and every causal lack of intent, every part and particle of this majestic, meaningless, meaningful world.”

But that doesn’t preach all that well. This lovely assurance that God will act while we keep watch, which feels to be Luke’s understanding of apocalyptic and of Advent: it just doesn’t preach all that well. I mean, if a sermon comes down to the final few moments of “so, what...?” then this reading doesn’t spur much of sermon: “So, nothing. Just wait here until the next word there is to share.” But surely it will come, because we’re only at the beginning.

Meanwhile, then, thanks be to God.