

“The Days Are Surely Coming...”

Luke 21:25-36; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

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Advent I

Today is the first day in a new liturgical year; a new year in the life of the Church. We begin again our annual retelling of the Jesus story: his promised coming; his incarnation; his ministry, death, and resurrection; his ascension; his taking a seat at the right hand of God Almighty, from whence he shall come to judge the living and the dead. It is a cyclical journey that begins and ends with his promised coming. Prophets anticipated his coming long, long ago. Some of those prophecies were fulfilled when he was born in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago. But other prophecies – prophecies about his coming again in glory at the end of all things – have *yet* to be fulfilled. The season of Advent is about *both* sets of prophecies: those that have *already* been fulfilled, and those that have *yet* to be fulfilled.

The word “Advent” comes from a Latin verb meaning “to come.” It simply means “coming.” There is Christ’s first coming, and Christ’s second coming; both comings are brought to the fore in this season of Advent. During these four weeks we retell the prophecies and stories that led to Christ’s first coming, the circumstances that culminated in Christ’s birth long ago. But we also call to mind the prophecies about Christ’s second coming, the ones that have not yet reached their culmination. These weeks of Advent are a time of hopeful expectation. Christ has come. But Christ will also come again!

The scripture readings on this first Sunday of Advent are focused primarily on the *second* coming of Christ – the coming that hasn’t happened yet. These readings invite us to look to the *future*. Let us turn our attention to the Gospel passage, to the fairly cryptic words of Jesus to his disciples about the apocalypse that is to come. “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.” (Luke 21:25) The sun, the moon, and the stars – the celestial bodies that we can see with our eyes – manifest signs that something fundamental is changing. The roaring of the sea and the waves cause distress across the whole earth. We’re not talking about global change caused by carbon emissions – as serious as that issue is for our future well-being – we’re talking about something even *more* catastrophic. The whole earth is reeling. Jesus continues: “People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.” (Luke 21:26) We’re talking about massive fear on a global scale.

It doesn’t sound like good news, does it? It doesn’t sound like something *hopeful*. Is it?

Hold those questions for a few minutes. First I want to stress that *Jesus is not saying anything new here*. The prophet Joel had talked about “the day of the Lord” when “the sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars withdraw their shining.” (Joel 3:15) Through Joel, God had said: “I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned

to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.” (Joel 2:30-31) The prophet Isaiah had also spoken about a “day of the Lord,” which he described as “cruel, with wrath and fierce anger.” (Isaiah 13:9) Isaiah said “the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light.” (Isaiah 13:10) So what Jesus was saying should have surprised any of his disciples. If they had been paying attention when the scriptures were read in their synagogues, they would have known those passages. *Jesus was not saying anything new.* Nor does he say anything new in the next verse, when he says “then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory.” (Luke 21:27) That line is basically a word-for-word quote from the book of Daniel: “I saw one like a son of man coming with the clouds of heaven.” (Daniel 7:13) Daniel continues: “And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.” (Daniel 7:13-14) That passage, too, should have been familiar to the Jewish disciples of Jesus. They should have been expecting the apocalyptic coming of “one like a son of man.”

This is a good time to point out that Jesus was the fulfillment of two *completely different* sets of Old Testament prophecies. There was, first of all, a set of prophecies about the coming of a “son of David.” The Christ, the Messiah, a king, a royal figure who would reign in glory, and restore the kingdom of David. This person would come *on earth*; he would walk, and talk, like any other human. The way Jesus fulfilled those prophecies came as a bit of a surprise; he did not take up a royal throne here on earth. That’s one of the reasons why so many Jews were simply not able to accept the truth that Jesus was the Messiah. He didn’t fulfill that set of prophecies in the way they expected the Messiah would.

But there was a second set of prophecies that Jesus fulfilled, these prophecies from Daniel and other places about a “Son of Man,” an apocalyptic figure who would come at the end of time – not *on* the earth, but *above* the earth, “coming with the clouds of heaven,” on the great day of the Lord, a day of wrath and judgment, a “great and terrible day” for the people of the earth. The prophecies about the Messiah were *different* from the prophecies about the Son of Man. Jesus was the fulfillment of *both*.

So in these verses from Luke’s gospel, Jesus simply reminds his disciples about old prophecies that had yet to be fulfilled, apocalyptic prophecies about the Son of Man and the great “day of the Lord” that would come at the end of all things. There was *nothing new* in his words. Except, perhaps, *hope*.

For in his next sentence he says this: “Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” (Luke 21:28) When you begin to see the apocalyptic signs that the prophets of old have foretold, Jesus is saying to his disciples, *take heart*. Everyone around you may be freaking out – and with good reason! – but for *you*, for those of you who hold true to the biblical values, for those of you who hold on for dear life to the biblical hope, for those of you who try valiantly to ground your lives in the kingdom of God, those apocalyptic signs are not *bad* news. They represent *good* news. The day of the Lord is *finally* at hand! The day of the Lord is *finally here!* Your *redemption* is at hand! Your *Savior* has come! Your entry into God’s kingdom begins *now!*

You see now why those apocalyptic signs are *good* news after all. They represent *hope*, fulfilled!

“When you see these things taking place,” says Jesus, “you know that the kingdom of God is near.” (Luke 21:31) But when will that day be? When will all those apocalyptic events take place? The next thing Jesus says has confused *many* Christians. “Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away

until all things have taken place.” (Luke 21:32) Many early Christians took that sentence literally. They thought that Jesus meant that he was going to come back *in their very own lifetimes*. They lived in the expectant hope that Jesus was going to come back *before they died*. They were wrong. Many Christians through the centuries have developed careful predictions of specific dates when the apocalypse would come. Many of those have been surprised, and perhaps a bit disappointed, when it didn’t happen when they thought it would. It seems to be the case that when Jesus said “this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place,” by “generation” he wasn’t referring to one *specific* generation of people, but perhaps to the whole span of human generations, stretching from then until now, and even beyond. “Heaven and earth will pass away,” said Jesus, “but my words will not pass away.” (Luke 21:33) The simple truth of the matter is that *we simply don’t know* when heaven and earth will pass away.

Some people have asked me, over the past couple years, if we are now experiencing the beginning of the “end times.” They look around at the things that are happening – extreme weather, political violence, a relentless pandemic – and they see parallels to things the Bible talks about. They are not wrong in seeing the parallels. Maybe we *are* living at the beginning of the end. But I am mindful of the fact that through the centuries civilizations have risen and fallen, plagues have come and gone, humans have unleashed tremendous forces on earth which we have had to get under control, for our own good. There are times I wonder what it was like to be living in last years of the Roman Empire, before it fell. This world has seen plenty of terrible calamities since Jesus walked the earth. Jerusalem itself has been destroyed and rebuilt how many times since Jesus’ death and resurrection? *A lot!* Jesus did not come back during any of those previous calamities. *Maybe* he’s going to come back soon. Or, maybe, he’s not. Maybe it is still a long, *long* time off, in the distant future. *We simply don’t know*.

What we *do* know is how Jesus calls us to *live* in the meantime. This is what Jesus talks to his disciples about next. “Be on guard,” he says, “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.” (Luke 21:34-35) Don’t waste your time on this earth in senseless, stupid, godless activities and worries. Christ calls us to a *different* way of life. “Be alert at all times,” he says, “praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.” (Luke 21:36) Ground your lives in *Jesus*. He was talking to his disciples a long time ago – but the truth of the matter is that his words apply to *all* of us Christians, through *all* the ages, until the day – whenever it will be – that he will come again.

We find the same theme in Paul’s first letter to the Christians in Thessalonika. Paul prays that the Lord “so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.” (1 Thess. 3:13) Those words were carefully chosen. *Strengthen your hearts ... in holiness ... be blameless ... at the coming of our Lord Jesus*. That’s it, the Gospel message in a nutshell. *Christ is coming!* I’m not talking about *Christmas*, the annual commemoration of his *first* coming; I’m talking about the *apocalypse*, Christ’s *second* coming, at the end of time. The question that needs to be on each one of our hearts is: if Christ were to come *right now*, *today*, what kind of people would he find? What will he see, when he looks at *your* heart, at *your* life?

To put this another way: when the great and terrible day of the Lord comes, when the Son of Man comes with the clouds of heaven, what will that day be like for *you*? Are there things you need to do *right now*, changes you need to make in your life *today*, so that day will be for you a day of *hope*?

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