

Scripture

Jeremiah 33:14–16

14 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."

Psalms 25:1–10

1 To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.

2 O my God, in you I trust;
do not let me be put to shame;
do not let my enemies exult over me.

3 Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;
let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.

4 Make me to know your ways, O Lord;
teach me your paths.

5 Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long.

6 Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old.

7 Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;
according to your steadfast love remember me,
for your goodness' sake, O Lord!

8 Good and upright is the Lord;
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.

9 He leads the humble in what is right,
and teaches the humble his way.

10 All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness,
for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.

Luke 21:25–36**The Coming of the Son of Man**

25 “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.”

The Lesson of the Fig Tree

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.

Exhortation to Watch

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.”

Sermon:

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

This is the first Sunday of December, the first Sunday of Advent. Yesterday the town threw the switch on the Panorama of Lights downtown, stores have been playing Christmas music for weeks now, and some of you have your trees up and decorated. The spirit of Christmas is about.

With all of this, some of you may have come to church this morning expecting to start hearing about angels and shepherds, travelling magi, a star, a young mother, and a baby. Instead, what you got was a part of Jesus' speech from the temple in Jerusalem full of frightening images, confusing metaphors, and shocking admonitions.

We are not encountering the sweet baby Jesus this Sunday, but the stern, adult Jesus, describing the whole universe being shaken and turned upside down, with signs in the heavens, disasters on the earth, and nations in turmoil.

Rather than hearing stories from the beginning of Luke, we are taken instead to the end, to the point just before the plot to kill Jesus unfolds. We're taken to a passage in which Jesus speaks not of his first, but his anticipated second coming at the end of the age.

This is because Advent involves preparing to two comings: the coming of God to earth in the infant Jesus on Christmas day, and the returning of Christ to earth at a time we do not know.

We are living in an in-between time. We are aware of Jesus; we are waiting for Jesus, while also knowing that he is presently with us, though we don't always know where he is.

We look for a baby to be born while knowing that the baby has already been born, and continues daily to be born within us – Advent contorts time.

While much of the rest of the church year moves through time in a linear fashion, Advent bends both past and future into a present moment that is still and quiet. Imagine being on a swing, going as high as you can, feeling that exhilarating rush in your belly.

There is a moment, at the top of the swing, when you can no longer tell if you are still going up, beginning to come down, or are just still – suspended in space and in time. That moment is Advent – a moment in time and out of time; a liminal moment between being and becoming, the beginning of the end and the end of the beginning.

Into this timeless moment Jesus speaks frightening and bold images of disaster and destruction.

Often we get overly focused on the prophetic aspects of the apocalyptic passages of the bible and try to determine the times and the dates. In this morning's apocalyptic reading Jesus

warned of '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.'

Looking through the current news I see that comet Wirtanen will become visible over the next few weeks, giving us signs and portents in the heavens. Certainly the nations are in distress, I needn't get into detail about that, and the roaring of the sea is causing flooding in the UK, and the waves of chaos are never quiet.

Does this mean that today is the day that we will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds? Perhaps. This might be the day.

It also may be that every day has plenty of signs and portents of its own, that Jesus was telling us that while we live through this in-between time that there will be dark times. We should expect hardship and difficulty, and in those times we should look to Jesus for help.

In the midst of our fear, we should lift our heads knowing that our salvation is at hand and the kingdom of God is near. The light shines brightly in the deep darkness and gloom, and when the world seems to be falling apart we should not assume that God has abandoned us. God is still present within the darkness and chaos.

In reminding us of the state of our fallen world, the message of Jesus is 'The world's a scary place, but don't let your hearts be troubled. I have overcome the world. Just wait - in the midst of the night there are strange and redeeming events afoot.'

Instead of trying to be sure of the times and dates and prepare accordingly, Jesus invites us to faithfully reside in the state of unknowing. That's because Jesus is not terribly concerned about our efforts to prepare for a defined day of reckoning. Jesus is not impressed by bunkers full of food and guns and generators. Jesus is less concerned about our doing, and more concerned about our being.

Living within and embracing the unknown and unknowable develops our faith. Seeking God in the darkness forges divine character. Jesus doesn't want our attention on the stars or for us to be distracted by world events as we seek to prepare. Jesus wants us to prepare for his coming by turning our attention to him, not the world.

We will find that it is not profitable for us to spend too much time trying to analyze apocalyptic texts in great detail, since life in this fallen world is always full of portents of the end. The world is one gasp away from annihilation at every moment.

If we stop merely thinking of apocalyptic texts as future prophesy and also consider them to be present commentary, then the apocalyptic message is not one of doom and gloom but rather a brilliant message of hope, assuring us that even in the darkest of nights Jesus is praying and working intently while we remain asleep – that when the world seems to be falling apart Jesus is not far; Jesus is more present than we are.

Because we are secure in Jesus, we need not fear the signs in the sky, the distress of the nations, or the roaring seas of chaos that surround us. Instead we look for the signs of the already-and-not-yet kingdom – the presence of the Prince of Peace in our midst.

Viewing the discrepancies between God's promised kingdom and the present suffering and injustice that marks our current world from a place of security in Christ empowers us in a way that no other people on earth can be. Rather than being overwhelmed by the constant crush of chaos that is our world, we can boldly name the injustice and suffering that we witness while we lean into God's promised alternative future.

We don't grieve as the rest of the world does – as those without hope. Our apocalyptic worldview is one of great hope and encouragement, not despair and surrender.

We need this hope and encouragement because the reality is this: anything can happen at any moment. Being a Christian is no guarantee that life will be easy or without pain. It's much more likely that the opposite will be true, that as Christians we will not only feel our own pain but also the pain of those around us as we love and stand up for those around us who suffer.

There are realities at work in the world that we will run up against – realities of brokenness and evil, hatred and destruction. Christ has warned us that we will encounter this.

Christ has also instructed us not to get weighed down by worry about the tribulations in our lives, because he will return. This means that we ought to live in hope despite all that may be falling apart in our lives, our communities, and the world around us.

While heaven and earth may pass away in the final eschatological transformation, the word of God stays firm, Luke reminds us. While judgement seems evident, redemption is drawing near.

Advent accentuates our place in between times with a foot in each world, neither here nor there, yet both here and there. Occupying this space creates great tension and especially at Advent the church can no longer contain its unfulfilled desire at the difference between what is and what is to come, and the cry bursts forth: Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus! O Come O Come Emmanuel!