

Advent 1

Living faithfully

Luke 21:15-26

A sermon preached by the Rev. Richard C. Israel, Associate Rector, at St. Paul's Episcopal Church on Sunday, November 29, 2009.

Today the church year turns, and a space opens up in time in which we are invited to begin again. Many of us lead such overscheduled lives that time itself can feel like an oppressive force, something we have to work against, stay ahead of, something to manage. But when we find ourselves once more on the first Sunday of Advent, it is possible to remember that time is one of God's gifts to us. This new year is another sign of God's faithfulness and mercy, an opportunity to become the people God intends us to be.

Today's gospel opens with troubling images of the collapse of the world's attic into its basement. Listen again to Jesus' words, "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."

Jesus spoke of a time when everything we have always counted on as stable and enduring suddenly will begin to crack. As long as humans have lived, there has been a fascination with the end of time. Did you know that the 5,125 year Mayan Long Count Calendar concludes during the winter solstice of 2012? I don't know about you, but I have an internal defense system that works overtime to distance me from such catastrophic predictions.

As I thought about this sermon I remembered a Thanksgiving visit to my mother in Tennessee some years ago. Earlier that year a geologist on the West Coast predicted there would be a devastating earthquake in early December that would rock middle America. It promised to be of far greater scope than previous earthquakes in California. My home town of Memphis is located smack dab in the center of the New Madrid fault which is considered by geologists to be potentially far more dangerous than other faults in the U.S.

I recall joking with my family that we would be long gone before the predicted time for the earthquake, but despite the jokes one could sense an edge of uneasiness when we got there. As we drove into town we couldn't help notice that some enterprising businesses were holding "earthquake sales". One of the hottest sellers was t-shirts. The most popular said on the front, "The Great Memphis earthquake of 1990". On the back, you had your choice between buying one that said, "I'm staying" or another saying, "I'm leaving." However, despite the gallows humor, people were stocking bottled water, making sure they knew how to turn off gas lines, and paying closer attention than ever to emergency instructions from City Hall.

I recall this experience because it stands out so clearly to me as an example of how massive is the resistance of the human will to the idea that disaster may strike, much less that someday earthly existence as we know it will come to an end. Reading today's Gospel we do well to notice that Jesus didn't stop with a doomsday prediction. If he had, we might be justified in distancing ourselves from thoughts of the end times. We might even be justified in viewing religious faith as primarily a means to cope with human tragedy and disaster. But Jesus

offers hope, not merely a means to cope. Robert Smith wrote, “What is astonishing here is that each paragraph in this lesson closes with unparalleled good news. The advent of terrors invites us to ‘lift up our heads, for redemption is drawing near.’ Stars may collide and whole worlds vanish, but ‘my words’, says Jesus, ‘will not pass away’. History will end, but these paragraphs say that it ends not in some black hole, but at the feet of the Son of Man.”

The wonder and mystery on which we are called to meditate in Advent is that the promised child in the manger whose birth we anticipate bears the promise of redemption for you and me. It is for this purpose that God Almighty dared to put on human flesh. It is for this purpose that Christ died and rose again. And it is for this purpose that Christ will come again—to call us to a world whose beauty, joy and peace passes all human understanding.

As we find encouragement in the promise that Christ’s coming again will be a day of joy not fear, we must take with utter seriousness Jesus’ call to be awake. This world is so much with us that we must be wary of being so absorbed with worldly concerns that we resist the gracious will of God. Notice Jesus’ concern for us. He is not aloof from us. Right now in the midst of a world whose values seem to mock God, Jesus invites us to pray for his strength which enables us to stand firm.

As Christ’s faithful, we are called to be out of step with this world. In the midst of wars and hunger, economic despair and pandemics, in the throes of abuse and family violence, divorce and death, we are called to believe in what seems to human reason to be a “pie in the sky” notion that God will bring redemption and wholeness to pass. Believing in the kingdom of God, we are called to pray and hope and care for those without much hope left. And one more thing, one more tough thing. We, who live by the hope of Christ’s resurrection, are given the task of working in the same direction as we hope.

Lewis Smedes, in a book entitled *Standing on the Promises*, wrote, “Hoping for others is hard, but not the hardest. Praying for others is hard, but not the hardest. The hardest part for people who believe in the Second Coming of Christ is in living the sort of life that makes people say, ‘Ah, so that’s how people are going to live when righteousness takes over the world.’”

On this first Sunday of Advent we are reminded to be out of step. Advent is a season of daring and reckless hope. It is a time of discarding all the baggage that gets in the way of really living. It is a time of looking for redemption and fulfillment beyond our imagining. And most importantly, it is a time for prayer that we might seek Christ’s kingdom and prepare for it with all our might by living faithfully in expectation of Christ’s day of fulfillment.

Madeline L’Engle captured the hope that is ours in these words.

“Come, Lord Jesus! Do I dare
Cry: Lord Jesus, quickly come!
Flash the lightening in the air,
Crash the thunder on my home!
Should I speak this awful prayer?
Come, Lord Jesus, help me dare.

Come, my Lord! Our darkness end!
Break the bonds of time and space.
All the powers of evil rend
By the radiance of your face.
The laughing stars with joy attend.
Come, Lord Jesus, be my end!

Come, Lord Jesus, at the end,
Time's end, my end, forever's start.
Come in your flaming, burning power.
Time, like the temple veil, now rend;
Come, shatter every human hour.
Come, Lord Jesus, at the end.
Break, then mend the waiting heart."