

1 Advent  
Christ & Grace  
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Luke 21:25-36  
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“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to heaven, we were all going direct the other way...” You may recognize these words from Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*. These words resonate with me as we begin the season of Advent. They sound so much like our apocalyptic, or end time readings – worry and hope all mixed together!

With this first Sunday of Advent we begin another church year this time with the author of Luke as our guide. We begin when the days are short and the nights are long, and the world’s commercial chaos overwhelms us. And all of this is the nature of life, isn’t it? Filled with ups and downs, twists and turns, rough and smooth places, dark and light, sorrow and joy, pain and peace.

The prophet Jeremiah offers us some comfort for the reality of life. The days are *surely* coming, he says. Jeremiah is speaking words of hope and encouragement to the people of Israel who had been forced on a journey into exile, and they longed to return to their home in Jerusalem. They were longing for a restoration of the normal life they once had, and the return of a king like David. You see, King Nebuchadnezzar had swooped down from Babylon, destroyed Jerusalem, and dragged the captives north into exile. So Israel knew destruction and knew what it was like to live in its aftermath. But Jeremiah, even as he was writing to them from a prison, gave them words of hope that the promise would be fulfilled, that a righteous branch would spring up. The days are surely coming!

Then in our gospel for today, Luke writes to a community beginning to lose hope. They are weary of waiting for Jesus to return. The years have passed, so many years that those who had known Jesus or heard about him firsthand were all dying, and still Jesus had not returned! Jerusalem has been destroyed yet again, and these early Christians are wrestling with fear and anxiety as they live with their own destruction and oppression by the Roman government. But Luke comforts them with the words of Jesus who acknowledges without sugar coating it, all the destruction that has occurred and that will occur in this mortal life.

What is Jesus trying to get his disciples to understand? There will be signs, he says. Now signs are of no use to us if we cannot see them, if we do not look for them. Jesus doesn’t give them an exact time for his return, but he does give them signs to watch for. Yes, some of them are dramatic and fearful, but no amount of sitting in fear and worry will help us through the chaos of roaring seas or distressed nations or any other works of darkness that come and go in our lives. We thought about this a few weeks ago when we heard a very similar passage from Mark’s gospel and realized it would not take us very long to come up with our own lists of personal apocalypses and works of darkness.

Jesus tells the disciples that life will be like this, but then he helps them refocus their gaze on, of all things, the fig trees! When Jesus tells the disciples, and us, to look at the fig trees, he is telling us to look for the signs that are all around us, right now, in the present moment. Signs that God is at work in the world contrary to everything else. Look for the signs!

In Advent we raise our heads from whatever consumes us and look around for the Kingdom of God. Worship is intentionally different to remind us to keep awake, to notice the nearness of God. The music, the prayers, the greens on the altar, the Advent wreath that brings a growing light into our space as we move toward the light of Christ arriving at Christmas all reveal God's nearness to us.

And if we look around the world, and in our own lives, we will see the Kingdom of God coming near there as well. No, it's not always easy, but God is calling us to lift up our heads, to shift away from always expecting the worst. Advent yearns and hopes with joyful anticipation. To focus only on what is wrong, what is missing, what has ended or might end, is to miss the present – is to miss the presence of God right now!

Charles Dickens reminds us that we have always known that life is full of best and worst, wisdom and foolishness, light and darkness, hope and despair. Yet the prophet Jeremiah reminds us that God's promise will be fulfilled, and Luke reminds us that while there will always be signs, it is those very signs that affirm God's nearness. Jesus says, "Look at the fig trees!" Look for the signs of life.

In Advent we wait and we watch. Pay attention to the lights of the season that light up the darkness and are reflected in the faces of excited children. Take time to enjoy the beauty of a winter sunset that paints a blaze of color across the sky. Watch for those who take tags from the Angel Tree to send some Christmas joy to children in need. Look for those who draw near to God as they hang Advent wreaths, sing at the funeral of a beloved parishioner, or prepare a resting place in the Memorial Garden. Notice those who slip in quietly during the week to polish brass or return laundered altar linens. All of these faithful ones are signs that the Kingdom of God is near.

As we read through the first chapters of Luke, we will see those who watched for the signs. A priest named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. Mary and Joseph. Shepherds in the fields. Simeon and Anna in the Temple. John the Baptizer in the wilderness. And the list goes on. As we wait and watch this Advent perhaps we can add our names to the list. And when we see the signs of God at work we can be like the prophets, speaking words of hope and encouragement to others.

The cycle of the seasons is constant, the fig tree and all the trees will sprout leaves. It is God who gives us grace in this mortal life, who remains with us through chaos and darkness...who draws near to us in our waiting.

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near! Amen.