

There Will Be Signs
A Sermon for the First Sunday of Advent
November 28, 2021
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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. 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. 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." Jeremiah 33:14-16

Jesus said, "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. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."

"Be on guard 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. 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."
Luke 21:25-36

On this first Sunday of Advent, when the darkness comes early and stays long, we begin to wait. In the Church, Advent refers to both the first and second coming of Christ. In its most basic sense Advent means “coming”, so we wait for something to come. We wait for Christ to come into our lives, because our hearts are weighed down with so many things. Each of probably has a list of things from the mundane to the most necessary, either for ourselves or for those we love. And while we are all too familiar with waiting, it’s never easy. The season of Advent can be an opportunity to improve our waiting skills and practice our patience.

In our Jeremiah passage this morning, the prophet is speaking words of hope and encouragement to the people of Israel who were living in exile, longing to return to their home in Jerusalem. They were waiting for a restoration of normal life and the return of a kingdom with a king like David. You see King Nebuchadnezzar had swooped down from Babylon, destroyed Jerusalem, and dragged the captives north into exile. While in exile they lived in constant fear and oppression; they knew destruction and lived in its aftermath. But Jeremiah, even writing from prison, gave them words of hope from the Lord. The promise would be fulfilled though it would look differently than it had looked before. There would not be a kingdom or a king as before, however a righteous branch would spring up.

Then in our Gospel today, Luke writes for people who are beginning to lose hope. They are weary of waiting for Jesus to return. So many years have gone by that those who had known Jesus or heard about Jesus firsthand were all dying, and still Jesus had not returned! Jerusalem has yet again been destroyed and the early Christians are wrestling with fear and anxiety as they live with their own destruction and oppression by the Roman government.

Luke remembered the words and teachings of Jesus. In writing down the oral stories and things Jesus said, these words again comfort the anxious people who fear the worst. Yes, Jesus acknowledges all the destruction that has occurred and that will occur in this mortal life. The roaring of the sea and the waves had always meant

“chaos” ever since creation and Jesus knows there is chaos in life. But then Jesus quotes the prophets saying that they will see “the Son of Man coming in a cloud” with power and great glory. All early Jewish Christians knew that clouds were associated with exaltation and glory and signs from God. Jesus’ words, as recalled by Luke, comforted the waiting Christians just as the words of the prophet Jeremiah comforted the exiled people of Israel.

Strange as it may seem, these words from Jesus are for us as well, living as we do in fear, anxiety, and uncertainty. They are timeless, eternal words, and they are spoken to us. Advent is a reminder that all time is God’s time. Jesus gives us some guidelines for waiting with patience through whatever it is that is destructive or oppressive in our own lives, because he knows that we experience times when works of darkness seem to hide the light; when we both fear and long for an ending, or a new beginning.

In these in between times we are not aware of God’s presence, and so we wait for God to redeem us, to redeem the situation. We wait for God to show up, make an appearance, and right what is wrong in our world. Like the disciples, we are probably frustrated when, as the world is falling apart, Jesus starts talking about fig trees! What is Jesus trying to teach the disciples? What is Jesus trying to teach us?

Jesus does not give a time for his return, but he does give signs that the kingdom of God is drawing near. Some of the signs 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.

Jesus knows that the worries of this life are many and that if we are not careful they will catch us unexpectedly like a trap. We worry about things we know are happening around the world. Even closer to our hearts, we worry about choices our children make, about aging parents, or about finances. Lots of things can become little apocalypses in our lives, revealing a change in the way things will be - an unexpected diagnosis from the doctor, a failed marriage, or the death of a loved one. These things can shake our world as surely as an earthquake. So then where is our hope? How do we wait with patience when our hearts are weighed down, when things fall apart?

When Jesus talks about the fig trees, perhaps he’s telling us to look for the signs that are all around us while we wait. Not the obvious ones, but the ones we might miss if we never take time to be still or practice patience. The signs that God is at work in the world, contrary to everything else, are hidden in plain sight. Look for the signs! Remember all that Jesus has taught us. Rather than worry - feed the hungry, heal the sick, seek justice. Spring up like a righteous branch, sprout new leaves like the fig trees! Be a light in this Advent to someone who waits in the darkness, and when we do see signs of God at work, may we, like Jeremiah and Luke, speak words of hope and encouragement to those who wait in darkness.

Jesus tells us to look for what we know to be true – for the reality of God’s eternal presence that is all around us. The cycle of the seasons is unchanging, the fig tree and all the trees will sprout leaves. It is God who gives us grace in this mortal life, with us in chaos and darkness, and who draws near to us in our waiting.

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