

The First Sunday of Advent
November 29, 2015
Year C, RCL

Jeremiah 33:14-16
1 Thessalonians 3:9-13
Luke 21:25-36

Jesus said, “Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Happy New Year! This is the First Sunday of Advent, and, thus, the beginning of a new liturgical year in the Church. In The Common Lectionary this is Year C, which means that the Gospel readings for most of the year will be from the Gospel of Luke.

The short season of Advent consists of the four Sundays immediately preceding Christmas. It is a time of preparation. We are to prepare ourselves for the advent or coming of the Messiah. But now it gets a little confusing. Which coming of the Messiah are we preparing for? There is the coming of Jesus the Baby in the Christmas story. There is the coming of the Messiah in the story of John the Baptist, when suddenly a new prophet and preacher appears at the Jordan River. There is the coming of Jesus to Jerusalem at the time of the Passover, when he was arrested for insurrection and crucified. And then there is the second coming when Jesus will return at the end of time. The Gospel readings assigned in the Lectionary go backwards in time. Today on the First Sunday of Advent we have heard Jesus talk about the end of time when the prophet Daniel’s prediction that the Son of Man will come in a cloud will be fulfilled. The next two weeks we will hear about John the Baptist predicting that one greater than he will come. Then on the Sunday before Christmas we hear of the pregnant Mary visiting her cousin Elizabeth and sing the Magnificat. And all of these weeks of preparing for the coming of the Messiah

coincide with our secular culture's preparing for the national holiday of Christmas, with all the purchasing of present and eating and drinking and visiting.

So today we begin with the end. The language that Jesus uses in the Gospel is a genre of speaking and writing that is quite foreign to us. The form is called "apocalyptic." Its most well-known examples are in the Book of Daniel in the Hebrew scriptures and the Revelation to John of New Testament. There is a lot of stuff about unusual cosmic phenomena and terrible disasters. In today's Gospel, Jesus says, "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." The point of this kind of writing is to give hope to people who are currently oppressed by the dominant culture. Apocalyptic says, "Don't give up. Things are about to change. Those systems and powers that are too big for you to change and that are making your life miserable are about to be overturned by superhuman forces." These themes have been kept alive in hymns and spiritual songs such as the Battle Hymn of the Republic. As recently as the 1960's popular songs such as "The times they are a-changin'" and "Eve of Destruction" were modern examples of the same thing.

Jesus makes clear that such times of turmoil are times for us to take heart. He says, "Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." So as we ponder these apocalyptic words of Jesus, what are the powers or systems of oppression that enslave us, or keep us from our full potential or threaten the welfare of our society or of the world? Most recently and tragically acts of terrorism with the random killing of non-combatant victims frighten us and makes us feel vulnerable. More generally, but

perhaps more damaging in the long run are issues such as the inability of our political leaders to govern, the increasing gap between the very rich and everyone else, the subservience of both political parties in this country to interests with the most money, immense wastes of resources on wars and defense, the unwillingness of the people of the world to reorganize the distribution of food so children do not die of hunger, a health care system in which the rich can buy care they do not need and the poor cannot get care they do need and in which the pharmaceutical companies and the insurance companies get rich at the expense of both individual citizens and the government, the idiotic destruction of our planet's ecosystems by the species inaptly named homo sapiens, and on and on, and. We can all make our own lists.

To us all Jesus says, "Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." When Jesus reaches his adulthood and begins his ministry, his first sermon will be, Readjust your thinking, for the kingdom of God is breaking in on us right now." The Welsh poet, R. S. Thomas, has this vision of God the Father and God the son looking at our sad and oppressed world. It is called "The Coming."

And God held in his hand
 A small globe. Look, he said.
 The son looked. Far off,
 As through water, he saw
 A scorched land of fierce
 Colour. The light burned
 There; crusted buildings
 Cast their shadows; a bright
 Serpent, a river
 Uncoiled itself, radiant
 With slime.

On a bare

Hill a bare tree saddened
 The sky. Many people
 Held out their thin arms
 To it, as though waiting
 For a vanished April
 To return to its crossed
 Boughs. The son watched
 Them. Let me go there, he said.

So now four weeks before Christmas, how can we prepare spiritually for the coming of Christ? Hear some more from Jesus from today's Gospel: "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." In other words, stay alert, pay attention. And don't be overwhelmed with worry. Pray for God's will to be done on earth. Have confidence in the ultimate victory of God and of the Good. Stand tall in the knowledge that we crazy Christians are on the winning side no matter what it may look like now. And make some contribution to addressing at least one of the big issues that beset us.

Here is the last stanza of Dylan's song:

The line it is drawn
 The curse it is cast
 The slow one now
 Will later be fast
 As the present now will later be past
 The order is rapidly fadin'
 And the first one now will later be last

For the times they are a-changin'.

The times, they are a-changin'. Jesus said, "Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." Even so, come, Lord Jesus.