

## **Sermon for Advent I, November 29, 2009**

Here, at the beginning of Advent, the intent of the church is not to spoil things with talk of the end of the world while the culture around us is set for weeks of parties, gift-giving, family reunions, and, for many who stay away the rest of the year, attendance at church. To be honest, these are (or can be) all good things; however, there's more going on here than just celebrating a festive season at the end of one year before we begin another. It is no wonder folks get a little confused between these beginnings and endings, when the year begins with a reading that appears to be about the end of everything. But it seems that it's important, even at the very beginning, to take the long view, to have the end in mind, even here, at the start of one more new church year.

It somehow seems fitting to begin this Interim time together in Advent. It will take some time for us to get to know one another ... an important part of this transition even as it difficult to let go of your former rector while anticipating a new rector at the end of our journey. This is a special time of visioning for the parish on her journey with God, a time of endings and new beginnings, a time of change.

Kate Huey reminds us that we can't enjoy beginnings and endings if we don't like change. And Jesus is describing the biggest change of all, the transformation of *everything*. People will be filled with fear, even more fear than when the Romans completely devastated Jerusalem. We know that the might of Rome was impressive to behold, but on this day even the heavens themselves will collapse, and the stars and the moon will fall out of their places in the sky, nothing will work as it should, and things will no longer go on as they have in the past.

This is apocalyptic talk. When things are especially bad for a group of people who feel persecuted and small, they express their hope for deliverance and their trust in their God by speaking in large, dramatic terms. How else would God up-end the power of something as mighty as the empire of Rome than by doing big things in big ways, even bringing down the heavenly bodies from their courses?

Metaphorical images like the moon and stars falling out of the sky portray the end of one age and the birth of another. When we recall that the sun was the symbol of Rome itself, while the moon and the stars represented the empire's client kings clustered around it, we can better understand that, when Luke is talking about the "powers of the heavens" being shaken, it's a kind of code: It is not the end of the cosmos but the shaking of the earthly principalities. Empires come and empires go, but they rarely come or go gently, or quietly.

Dianne Bergant reminds us that there's a "distress that accompanies any major natural, social, or personal upheaval. At such times we may be shaken to our foundations; we are dismayed, frightened to death". We know that even good change brings a kind of stress and instability, and we humans prefer things to be calm, predictable, and comfortable. William Bridges in *Transitions* describes the in-between time we experience in any major change in our lives. There is a period of time, he says, that we spend in between one time and another time. In that in-between time, we have to live with things being not so clear or comfortable, not familiar and not being what they will be one day. That seems to be what Advent living is about.

"The Advent way of life," Bergant writes, "does not necessarily require unusual behavior on our part, but it calls us to live the usual unusually well. This "in-between time" affects the everyday events of life; it directs the way we interact with people; it informs the attitudes that color our judgments and motivations. It is as ordinary as the birth of a child; it is as extraordinary as the revelation of God." This is my hope for you during this interim.

As an illustration of "living the usual unusually well" and keeping alert at the same time, Richard Ascough suggests a short story written by Leo Tolstoy, "Where Love Is, God Is," about a cobbler whose hope for a dramatic revelation of God is answered by the everyday sightings of God as love in action, in charity, justice, and compassion toward the people Martin meets each day.

Barbara Brown Taylor gets to the heart of the matter, when she concentrates on the fig tree. By directing the disciples' attention to a sprouting tree, Jesus let them know that God was speaking to them in the most ordinary events of their lives. Be alert, yes, she writes, but "not so you will know when to grab your crash helmet and head for the basement, but so you will know when the kingdom is near. So you will not miss God when God comes." And while we wait, we should pray.

During Advent, we are looking forward, just as our Jewish ancestors in faith looked forward, to the fulfillment of God's promises of peace. Christians see in Jesus the gift of peace, and we sing carols about that peace, and yet we look around and see that the world is not at peace. Justice does not reign, and the earth groans in pain, and nations continue to settle their disputes by killing each other's young.

It is here that Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan are especially helpful. They claim that repentance in the Bible "emphasizes change," which means that when we repent we "turn to God" and "away from the lords of this world." The New Testament understanding adds to this turning, "'to go beyond the mind that you have,' to enter into a new mind-set, a new way of seeing."

The end-time, Borg and Crossan write, "is not about some mass immigration from a doomed world to a blessed heaven. Rather, it is about the end of this era of war and violence, injustice, and oppression. It is about the earth's transformation, not about its devastation. It is about a world of justice and peace. Is God going to act alone to transform the earth (and all we can do is wait and pray), or do we collaborate with God? Do we ignore the whole question of transformation of the earth and just concentrate on our own personal, private salvation? "The Christmas stories," they write, "are not about a spectacular series of miraculous events that happened in the past that we are to believe in for the sake of going to heaven. Rather, they are about God's passion, God's dream, for a transformed earth"

Kathy Beach-Verhey writes that Vincent van Gogh's magnificent painting, *The Starry Night* "really captures the mood of this Advent text as it "depicts an apocalyptic sky,"

with "swirling clouds in bold yellows and white on deep, dark blue and black." There is a bold and bright yellow moon and very bright stars. Some see it as a daunting image of a frightening sky, others as something bold and beautiful, others as a glimpse of God. Like van Gogh's great painting, Luke's apocalypse elicits different reactions from those who admire it. Frightening, bold, and beautiful glimpses of God – this is what Jesus offers on this First Sunday of Advent." It is an offer we should keep in our minds and hearts this Christmas, listening for God to call us into the birth of a new and transformed and beautiful world.