



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

the_comings_of_jesus_the_first_sunday_of_advent_11_28_2021_

In the name of the loving, liberating, and life-giving God. Amen.

Today's gospel is the second half of a passage that we heard a couple of weeks ago where Jesus is describing the signs of what has become known as the end times. You remember those? Nation will rise against nation. There will be wars and rumors of wars and insurrections, and there will be great earthquakes, famines, and plagues.

And today we hear more about this "day of reckoning" as Eugene Peterson in his modern translation puts it, "The sun, moon, stars, earth, sea, in an uproar, and everyone all over the world in a panic, it will seem as if all hell has broken loose." Well, I don't know about you, but it seems to me that whenever I hear the end times described in the Bible, I can't help but notice that regardless of the decade or the century in which we hear it that it always manages to sound like it's describing the current times.

And I don't think that's a coincidence. In the first part of this passage, Jesus describes the signs of trauma and tribulation as necessary birth pains. And Pastor Manisha made a wonderful observation a couple of weeks ago that if violence and disaster and suffering are birth pains, then it feels as if this world has been in labor since its entire existence. Again, I don't think that's an accident.

The end times, as they are called, have been a mystery that the church has grappled with since the very beginning. It's something of a preoccupation for parts of our church, even today, trying to guess the signs, read the tea leaves, and then famously making all kinds of public predictions that always turn out to be wrong. But it's not just those fundamentalists that do that today. The Apostle Paul, and even perhaps the author of today's gospel, thought Jesus would return in their lifetime. Today's letter to the Thessalonians is in part a response to their concerns about trying to work out the details of exactly when Jesus would return.

It's one of the great challenges of the faithful life, I think. Knowing that God will one day come to set all things right. But in the meantime, in this in-between time, we find ourselves with an awfully long and often painful wait. Advent is a season of waiting. It comes from the Latin word *adventus*, which means coming

or arrival. And so the Advent season is a time of preparation and anticipation that directs our hearts and our minds to the coming of Christ.

And I'm going to guess most of you probably knew that, but do most of you know that there are actually several comings of Christ that we anticipate in Advent? His first coming as a child born in Bethlehem, which we of course celebrate on Christmas; His second coming at the end of history, which we may have just heard a preview of, but there's another coming, one that I don't think gets as much attention or fanfare, one that certainly isn't the subject of debate and speculation, but it's perhaps the *adventus* that matters most. And that is Christ's daily coming into our hearts.

And so despite our fascination with the end times, the scripture readings during Advent, tell us to not waste our time, trying to make predictions and speculation, recall this whole conversation with the disciples. This whole thing began with them admiring the grandeur of the temple and the glorious stone work. And Jesus is kind of overhearing this and He says, you know, none of that is going to last. All of that will one day pass away. You do know that right? Nothing lasts forever, nothing in this life, except Jesus. His point, therefore, is that we are to live our life on guard and ready. Not weighed down and distracted by the cares and worries of this world, but awake with our heads lifted high and our eyes open, ready to respond when the end times come. Because in a sense, the end times are already here and perhaps they've always been.

Each day it is the end of the world for someone - thousands of someones, to be precise. And the end is near for hundreds and thousands more who will die later this week because of malnutrition, lack of water, lack of access to medical care and basic shelter. And so Advent is a season of waiting. It's a time to look around and to recognize that all is not as it should be. And it's a time to dream, to use our holy imaginations to see the world as it could be. And it's a season to be reminded that in the face of all of this brokenness, in the face of such persistent suffering and injustice, and a humanity that has become so lost, amid a life of such constant change, the only constant, the only thing that will never pass away is God.

And that God came to us as a child to show us the way home and to come into our hearts. So that in the meantime, in this in-between time, we can be the body of Christ. We can be His hands and His feet, His eyes and His ears, so that we can love as Christ loved us until the day comes, when God's ways and God's love reign on earth as it is in heaven. We don't need to read the signs. We don't need to see the tea leaves. We don't need to predict Christ's return. He has already come. All we need to do is to let Him in. Let Him come into our hearts and take over our lives. And when we do that, we become Christ's body. We become the ones we've been waiting for.

Notice in this gospel that when there is distress upon the world and everything seems to be going to hell, the rest of the world faints, cowers in fear, we are to stand. To stand up and to lift our heads as if to say, here I am. Make me an agent of your healing, make me the agent of your reconciliation and your forgiveness and your mercy. And as Jesus says today, when we do that, that is the moment of our redemption. That is the moment of this third coming when Jesus is born again into our hearts and we stand up to fear and we stand with the least, the lost, and the left behind

The greatest challenge we face today, I think, it's not war, not rumors of war, not insurrections, not the pandemic or our prejudices or even our divisions, as deep as they may seem. The greatest challenge that we have is fear because fear is at the root of all of that brokenness. And it is fear that keeps us from standing against it. Fear is what turns those who are different into an enemy. Fear creates divisions and distrust in our communities, and even our own families. Fear causes us to live in scarcity and to look out for ourselves first and remain blind to the abundance that is all around us. Fear causes us to define ourselves and those around us, not by how we are similar, but how we are different. It drives us inward. It hardens our heart. It darkens our vision and it stunts our imagination for what's possible.

We just finished a six part series on how to thrive after trauma. And so we looked at practices that can help us not just to survive, but to be transformed by the tragedies of life and be reborn again and again, to something new, something more compassionate, someone more connected, more forgiving, more grateful, and more at peace than ever before. And so we looked at practices like community, forgiveness, gratitude, generosity, all things that help us rise to this new life.

And it occurred to me as I was going through that series, that to every one of those practices, the thing that held us back, if you were to boil it down to its core is fear. Fear keeps us from connecting with others because we fear rejection. We fear being turned down. We fear what it will do to our ego and our pride when we risk reaching out. Fear makes it harder to forgive because we fear losing our identity because our resentments and our grievances and our judgments have become way too much a part of who we think we are.

Fear can keep us from being grateful, because it means admitting that we are not the master of our own destiny, that we are, in fact, each of us indebted to others and dependent on others beginning first with the grace of God. Maybe this is why the Bible tells us - and there are people out there who have counted this, more than a hundred times it tells us, do not be afraid. Over and over throughout scripture, we are told by prophets and priests, angels, disciples, and even Jesus Himself, do not be afraid.

But notice the Bible says do not be afraid. That is, do not be your fears. It's okay to feel afraid, I think. The brokenness of our world, the birth pains that we see all around are going to make us afraid again and again. The key I think is to not identify with your fear, don't become the fear, feel it, notice it, see it for what it is - a warning that something's happening. Something's about to change. God may be up to something. The end times are coming once more. And then see it for what the gospel says it is today: the doorway to our redemption, the moments when the cries of this world let Christ into our hearts once more and we stand up and we lift our heads and we walk through.

And the good news - the good news is no matter what we find on the other side, no matter what the world tries to throw at us, no matter how bad it can get, no matter how hopeless it may seem, we have nothing to fear because it is none other than God that awaits us on the other side, waits for us with arms open wide, to welcome us all home. And remember as well that Jesus has been there too. This world threw everything it had at Him, including death, and He got up. God raised Jesus and in so doing said, no. No to the forces of evil, no to the forces of fear and death, no to the bullies and to the bigots, no to suffering and pain. No, you will not have the last word. I do. And that last word, it's the same as the first word. And He will be with you always.

As we prepare for this coming of Christ once more, let us set aside our diversions and our distractions and let us be on guard. Let us be awake for the birth pains that are happening in our little corner of the world, wherever that might be - our own neighborhood, our coworkers, the teller at the local market, the little boy being bullied at school, our own family. Wherever we see suffering and loneliness, wherever we see divisions and sadness, injustice, prejudice, let us be awake. Let us have our fears tell us that now is our time. Now is the time to stand up. Now is the time to raise our heads because now is the time that Christ is about to be born into our hearts once more. Amen.