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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

November 28, 2021

Year C, 1 Advent, Revised Common Lectionary

[Jeremiah 33:14-16](#)

[Psalm 25:1-9](#)

[1 Thessalonians 3:9-13](#)

[Luke 21:25-36](#)

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What would you do if you knew the world was about to end tomorrow?

If you knew you had just one day left, you and everyone else in the whole world?

What would you do?

There's an apocryphal story that someone asked the great church reformer Martin Luther this question. What would you do if you knew the world was about to end tomorrow? And his answer was: "I would plant a tree." For two reasons. First, every single one of the many, many people so far who have confidently thought they knew the world was about to end has been wrong. Why should I be different? And second, if the end really is at hand, at least my Savior will return and find me caring for the earth.

I love that answer. So I was disappointed to learn that there's no evidence Martin Luther ever actually said that. Instead it seems the story originated among members of the underground German Confessing Church as they sought to endure against the Nazi regime in the face of overwhelming odds and persecution. That story was a way of inspiring hope in perilous times.

Most of us probably don't think the world is actually about to end tomorrow. Although of course none of us knows that for sure. Nor do we live in the apocalyptic conditions of the Second World War. But we do live in times with perils of their own. We have our own versions of signs in the heavens and on the earth: wildfires, winds, droughts, the signs of a climate crisis that with continued inaction will become a climate catastrophe. We have distress among nations: rising authoritarianism, attacks on democracy, a civic order that feels as if it's in a tailspin. We could map some of Jesus' apocalyptic sayings onto the times we live in. And at an individual level each of us faces our own moments of apocalypse: an accident; a broken relationship; a devastating diagnosis; or even just the knowledge that we are here in the end for just a short time. Whether it comes to us sudden and early or peacefully after fourscore years and ten, our own world will end.

"This generation will not pass away until all things have taken place," Jesus says. And in one sense that's not true. Jesus' first generation of followers all died, and so have generations upon generations since, and the Son of Man has not yet returned.

Then again, Jesus may have been talking about the destruction of the Temple by the Romans and the devastation of Jerusalem, a historical event which did very much take place during their lifetimes. It's hard to tell, as Jesus switches back and forth in this discourse from talking about dramatic crisis on a human scale to talking about the mysterious return of the Son of Man and the ushering in of the reign of God, and from warning his followers not to be fooled into thinking that wars or disasters mean the end is at hand, to telling them to be on the lookout and watch for the signs. What's clear is that following Jesus means getting ready; being alert; keeping watch. Stay awake, says Jesus. Be on your guard. Pray for strength to endure. And also, take hope. Lift up your heads. Your redemption is near.

Today is the beginning of Advent. This is a season of expectation. Of self-examination. Of repenting what we need to repent and letting go of what hinders us. And it's also a season of hope and joy, fierce joy, joy that looks straight into the terrors and traumas of our lives and says: lift up your heads; your Savior is at hand. It's often said that Advent is about preparation for Christmas, and of course that's true. But Advent is about so much more than that. We can't really prepare for the birth of Jesus. It's already happened. We can't pretend ourselves back 2000 years in time any more than we can go back and prepare for the Tubbs fire or September 11 or any other event that's passed into history. What we can do of course is to prepare ourselves once again to celebrate the commemoration of that event at Christmas. Christmas 2021 is different from any other Christmas that has ever happened. What can we do today to help ourselves arrive at December 25th, 2021 with open hearts and in right relationship with our neighbors?

And we can also prepare ourselves for what really is still yet to come, that glorious climax to history that Jesus talks about today. Not fooling ourselves that we know what it could possibly be like or when it will arrive, but simply putting our faith in the fact that God is in charge of the whole human story as well as the story of all creation beyond humanity, that God's purpose is to set the world to right and that nothing can ultimately thwart God's purpose, and that we with everyone else God has created will one day stand with everything we have ever been and done exposed to ourselves and to God's infinite justice coupled with infinite love. How do we approach that day? Not by trying to save ourselves by our own good deeds or best efforts, but by putting our trust in God's grace as we have come to know it through Jesus, and then by living in the light of that grace: simply, mercifully, following the footsteps of the Son of Man.

You've seen the bumper sticker: "Jesus is coming: look busy!" Good joke; terrible theology. Jesus isn't looking to be impressed by our frantic labors. Part of Advent means making space for rest and silence. What Jesus hopes for instead is to find us faithful. Jesus is coming; plant a tree. Plant seeds of hope, generosity, resistance to evil, hospitality to neighbors. And lift up your heads: your redemption is drawing near.