

Sermon: Wait for it...

Scripture: Luke 21:25-36

Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans

Date: November 28, 2021

Wow, things just went from soft, sweet and warm to threatening and dire pretty quickly! There's the Christmas Tree, evergreens, the creche and poinsettias and then we have Jesus, not a baby anymore threatening the end of the world as we know it! And that's the season we have just entered into where we begin to prepare our hearts for the incarnation of the divine into human being, infinite light in finite darkness, where the violence of Herod comes right alongside the birth of a baby, where evergreens are hung and the earth is in distress, where people "are nestled all snug in their beds while visions of sugar plums dance in their heads" and people will "faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world!" So welcome to Advent and the lead up to Christmas.

The church across the centuries has always placed these apocalyptic, end of world passages from the Gospels right here at the beginning of Advent because the season of Advent, the 4 weeks leading up to our celebration of Christmas was originally about preparing not for celebrating the First Coming of Jesus the babe in a manger but the Second Coming of Jesus, the Son of Man, from clouds of heaven to bring judgment upon the earth... That's why we have all the Advent injunctions to watch and to wait, to prepare and to be ready, "lest the day catch you unexpected like a trap!" Or as the bumper sticker says – "be alert for the world needs more lerts!"

But scholars argue. Many think that these passages are not so much about the Second Coming, but that was a later historical accretion and that what Jesus was really warning about was the more immediate destruction of the temple and Jerusalem by Rome which would occur about 40 years after his death in 70 AD.

“The end of all things” was a way of saying, everything is going to change, everything is passing and passing away, nothing is permanent, nothing, lasts forever – “heaven and earth will pass away,” Jesus says in the Gospel of Mark, “but my words will never pass away.” The evergreens of Christmas are a symbol of the evergreen, eternal nature of the divine, but even they after Christmas become brown and brittle and make a mess of our living room floors.

Everything is passing. Last week I spoke about Jesus telling his disciples “do not worry” and his invitation to manage our worry by “considering the lilies of the field” and prioritizing Kingdom values over the drives and desires of this world. This week we have another invitation to deepen our spiritual lives in the season of Advent by being attentive to the impermanence of existence, to meditate on the passing nature of life. Everything is passing away and that’s OK. Meditate upon Psalm 90 in your prayer time:

[3](#)You, O God, return the human to dust,
saying, “Return, O sons and daughters of mortals.”
[4](#)For in Your sight a thousand years
are but a day that passes,[a](#)
or a watch of the night.
[5](#)You whisk them away in their sleep;
they are like the new grass of the morning—
[6](#)in the morning it springs up new,
but by evening it fades and withers...
[12](#)So teach us to number our days,
that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

Or sit with Shakespeare’s word in Macbeth:

“Life is but a walking shadow, a poor player, / That struts and
frets his hour upon the stage, / And then is heard no more.”

By meditating upon the impermanence of existence, we are moving into Buddhist territory and so we might consider the Heart Sutra and one of the most famous lines, that’s most repeated and written about, in Buddhist holy texts – “gate, gate,

paragate, parasamgate, Bodhi Svaha!” Which is translated in various ways but basically means “gone, gone, entirely gone.” And this is how they end the Heart sutra after having chanted “no birth, no death, no being no non-being, no increasing, no decreasing, the body is emptiness and emptiness the body. Gone, gone entirely gone...” It’s intended to break down our logical dualistic frames of reference. As one Buddhist writer and interpreter, Karl Brunnholzl puts it – “these sutras pull the rug out from under us, saying there’s nothing whatsoever to hold onto, they take away all our favorite [mental] toys. Usually when someone takes away our mental toys we just find new toys... that is one reason why the heart sutras are so long – they list all the toys we can think of and even more, but our mind keeps grasping for new ones. The basic point is to get to a place where we are no longer searching for and grasping at the next toy... then how does our state of mind feel when we are no longer grasping, when there is no place left to go.

How does our state of mind feel when we are acknowledging that it’s all passing, the end is all around us and we are just waiting...for what we do not know fully - a baby, yes but not a baby; a god, yes but not a god; a savior yes but not a savior. What are we waiting for... the key is not to lock the answer to that down. Are we waiting in Advent for hope, peace, joy, love? T.S. Eliot seems to think not in his poem East Coker, he writes:

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
 For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love,
 For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
 But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
 Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
 So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.

No birth, no death, no increasing no decreasing, wait without thought. I think we’d be better off at times hearing Jesus’ words as more about dismantling

our mental categories than trying to squeeze and clear and logical lesson out of them. If in fact he is true God and true hu-Man then his coming must in the end must be a category-busting, mind-bending, psyche-altering, dis-orientation. And if God is coming among us to bring something new then there is likely going to be some dismantling of the old.

Neale Donald Walsch puts it this way –

“yearning for a new way will not produce it. Only ending the old way can do that. You cannot hold onto the old all the while declaring that you want something new. The old will defy the new; the old will deny the new; the old will decry the new. There is only one way to bring in the new. You must make room for it.”

And that is what Advent is about, making room for the new. That’s what we are waiting for... wait for it... wait for it...not just something new to pile onto what is already here but a dismantling and destruction and releasing of the old so the new can take it’s place. The Christ child can’t be born anew into a heart at Christmas that is full of the old life, all must be gone, gone entirely gone.... The hard spot to be in is when it’s all going, going, unhinging, collapsing and there is as of yet no sign of the new that is coming, no guarantee that the new will actually show up and when it does what it will look like. It’s what is called liminal space and time, when the old is departing or gone and before the new has arrived, when we are grieving what is lost and haven’t yet recognized what is gained, it’s completely disorienting and at times distressing, an in-between space and it’s that liminal experience that is at the heart of Advent and where the rubber of our experience meets the road of our faith cause Jesus tells us what we must do in this terribly dismantled and vulnerable state where everything says cower and protect and resist... He says “take your place, stand up, raise your head and see, for your redemption draws near.”