

Sermon for Advent 1B
Sunday, December 3, 2023
“Advent is for waiting”

Text: Isaiah 64:1-9; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Astrophysicists predict that the sun, which is about 4½ billion years old, is halfway through its lifespan, and in another 4½ to 5 billion years, the sun’s mass will have been depleted to the point where the gravitational hold at its core will be overwhelmed, and the sun will expand to become a red giant star, engulfing the planets Mercury, Venus, the Earth, the moon, and Mars, before eventually dimming to a tiny white dwarf star. That sounds really scary and strikingly similar to what Jesus was describing at the beginning of today’s gospel.

The Gospel reading is considered to be apocalyptic writing; that means that it describes the end times. This past Wednesday at low mass, we read from the Gospel according to St. Luke when Jesus was also describing end times. But the thing to remember whenever we read apocalyptic writing in the Bible is that while it speaks in terms of that which is to come, it describes events that have already happened. In today’s gospel lesson from the Gospel according to St. Mark, Jesus spoke of signs that would predict the end times, and indeed Christians back in the First Century believed that Jesus was coming right back. This message was particularly meaningful to Jews and the young Christian community at the time that Mark’s Gospel was written because they had just lived through the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD. The loss of the temple represented a catastrophic loss of the center of Jewish religious, political, and economic life and of God’s divine presence in the world. Their world was turned upside down, in complete turmoil—again. They were living in the midst of tension, inequality, being ruled by the Romans, enslavement, and threat to their very existence.

As we hear these words describing “the end of days,” we can’t help but relate those events to what we’re going through today. We hear of death and destruction in Gaza, tension in the Holy Land, war and occupation in Ukraine, violence and protest in this country, inequality, many find it difficult to make a living or survive with the high costs of living, global warming, climate change, pollution. The words of Isaiah ring in our ears: “We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.” When we look around, it seems like we are living in the last days and heading right into the end times. We are expecting the Messiah to return at any moment, just like the folks in the First Century, two thousand years ago!

Today begins the season of Advent. It is the beginning of the new liturgical year in our church calendar. The three-year Sunday Lectionary cycle advances to Year B,

during which most of the gospel lessons will come from the Gospel according to Mark, and the two-year Daily Office cycle switches to Year 2. Advent is a season of preparation for celebrating God's incarnation at Christmas. During Advent, we start over. We are supposed to empty ourselves and make space for God to be at the forefront of our thoughts and desires. We experience so many things that make us anxious, things that cause us to worry, situations that make us think that we must be living in the last times, because everything seems to be getting worse and worse.

This week I came across the sermon preached last week by the senior minister at Harvard University, the Rev. Matthew Ichihashi Potts. He was talking about hell and end times. He said, "We know what hell looks like. It looks like Jerusalem 2,000 years ago. It looks like Gaza today. We don't need to imagine a future place which is hellish in some mythological or legendary or some other kind of way. We know what it looks like in these places and countless other places in our world, countless other moments in our world, places where kindness and goodness and decency and dignity are so hard to come by and so desperately needed. Our world is ruined, but in the ruins of the world, God is love."

The theme of the First Sunday of Advent is hope, and that's where we need to direct our attention and energy. While we await Christ's return to usher in the final manifestation of the Kingdom of God on earth, we have to live from day to day. During this season, the church's tradition has been to look toward the east, toward the rising sun, because that's the direction from which we expect the Messiah to come. Advent makes us wait. I know this is hard to do when all of the cultural cues around us tell us that Christmas has already arrived. Sure, we can still enjoy the festive sights, sounds, smells, and tastes of the holiday season. How can we avoid it? Christmas carols play constantly in stores, on the radio, in commercial ads. Everywhere you go, there are Christmas lights, decorations, Santa Clauses, nativity scenes. It's hard to get *prepared* for something that seems to have happened already. And, that's precisely why we need Advent! We have to open our hearts and minds, clear out the clutter of anxiety, worry, sadness, shame, and make room to see God everywhere we go.

That's why all of our readings today end the way they do. Isaiah ends with a message of hope: "Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand." In the epistle lesson today, St. Paul encourages the Corinthians that Jesus Christ "will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." And St. Mark tells us that Jesus said, "They will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven. Truly I tell you...heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."

The message for us today as we enter the new church year is never to stop hoping. Life is going to try to swallow us up. People and powers are going to knock us down and try to keep us down. Situations will press on us from every side, and despair will seem to be everywhere we turn. But we have to have hope and we have to look for God in the midst of the chaos. We await for Christ's return, but he is already here in the people we meet who are sharing the love of Christ. He is already here among us in the Holy Eucharist. He is already here in the words of scripture. And since he *is* here, we have no reason to fear or feel defeated.

So as we begin the church's new year, as we start another Advent, remember that waiting is part of the journey and hoping is required to help us while we're on the road. In looking for God everywhere we turn, we will find the hope of the season. We can still enjoy the festive sights, sounds, smells, and tastes of the holiday season. Jesus Christ was here on earth a long time ago to remind us that God loves us and that we should do likewise and love one another. He lived in a world that was full of despair, struggle, pain, and lost dreams, but he taught his followers why they had reason to hope. God came down to earth to live among us to show us how to hope while we wait through life. God lived among us to show us that he is always with us: in the flesh 2,000 years ago and by the presence of his Holy Spirit ever since. Humanity still struggles and we still grasp for hope. Someday Christ will return to bring about the Reign of God in his Kingdom. No one knows when that will happen; only God knows. But, until that time, no matter what cards life deals to us, we have the hope of Advent that God is in control now and for ever. Amen.

Resources

"What is the life cycle of the sun?" <https://www.universetoday.com/18847/life-of-the-sun/>.

David Schnasa Jacobsen, "Commentary on Mark 13:24-37," in *The Working Preacher*," http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3482.

The Rev. Matthew Ichihashi Potts, Sermon preached on November 29, 2023. The Memorial Church, Harvard University. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7rVmJ6X_BsM