

ANXIETY AND ANTICIPATION

²⁵*'There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. ²⁶People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in a cloud" with power and great glory. ²⁸Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.'* ³⁴*'Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, ³⁵like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.'* (Luke 21:25-28, 34-36, NRSV)

It's hard to believe that Thanksgiving is past and that Christmas is right around the corner. We're starting to spot wreaths and lights, and our calendars are getting full. When we look at the month of December, we often find ourselves trying to cram too many things into too little time. Even under the best of circumstances, it can be stressful. There's the pressure to find the perfect gift on the same day that the rest of America decides to search for the exact same item. We have extra parties, concerts, and church services to attend. We're expected to cook up wonders in the kitchen and tastefully decorate our homes. We must negotiate logistics with our extended family and travel plans with our nuclear family...along with the rest of the country. In the midst of all this, we're trying our best to provide our children and grandchildren with warm family memories while dealing with our own painful memories of loved ones who've died. And to top it all off, we're supposed to exude a special holiday cheer.

And then we come to church today, and the minister, instead of reading a warm, fuzzy scripture about Christmas reads some extremist account of what sounds like the end of the world. What was he thinking? In my defense, I'll let you know that this passage was listed in the lectionary as one of the recommended passages for today. The lectionary, for those of you who don't know, is a series of readings from the Bible recommended for each Sunday. If followed, a church will cover the majority of the Bible in three years.¹ But why is this passage listed for today? After all, today is the first Sunday of Advent, the beginning of a brand new church year, and the time we start looking toward Christmas.

The word Advent comes from the Latin word *adventus*, which means "coming" or "arrival." Each week in Advent has a theme, which underscores a crucial element in the Christian life. The first week points to hope, the hope we have from God in this life and the next. The second week highlights peace, the peace that God desires in the world as well as the peace of mind that our faith can bring. The third week focuses on joy, the kind of joy that cannot be bought and only comes through trust in someone greater than

ourselves. The fourth week points to love, the love of God shown to us in the birth of Jesus and the love for others revealed in the life and teachings of Jesus.

This brings us to Christmas Eve, the night we sing “Away in a Manger” and “Silent Night.” The night we watch our children become Christmas Pageant angels and sheep. The night we read Luke’s account of the humble birth of our heavenly King. All these events warm our hearts and nourish our souls.

Until Christmas arrives, in all that busy in-between time, we live in the days of Advent, a time for looking back at the events leading up to Christ’s first advent on earth, Christmas. And a time for looking into the future, that future meeting with Christ at the end of time, in his second advent or appearance.

To be honest, I’m not that comfortable with today’s passage, myself. At first glance it’s difficult to tell what these apocalyptic words have to do with the Advent themes of hope, peace, joy, and love. Where exactly are we to find hope amidst earthquakes, famine, pestilence, and strange signs in the stars, sun, and moon? The legitimate question arises, what are we to make of apocalyptic passages and why are we reading them during Advent?

I believe that whether or not we choose to take these passages literally, there’s still a message for us here. It’s important to remember that the writers of apocalyptic passages often wrote in symbols and codes, so that their Christian audience would understand, but the people who persecuted Christians would miss the point entirely. Also when dealing with the words of Jesus we heard read today, we need to distinguish between his comments on the future destruction of the Jewish temple, and his words about a future epoch that might or might not be the end of time.

In the early verses of Luke chapter 21, he’s clearly referring to the destruction of the temple by the Romans in 70 AD. But later in the chapter, he seems to have something else in mind when he’s describing his spectacular return to Earth in a cloud.

I must confess, when I read these passages I feel a certain bit of anxiety that goes back to my childhood days in a theologically conservative church. Growing up, the second coming of Christ always seemed more of a threat than a promise. We were lectured to always be ready and on the lookout for signs of his coming. And most importantly to be prepared to stand before the judgment seat and account for everything, yes everything we ever did or said on earth. Yikes! It was enough to make you want to keep Jesus as far away from earth as possible because when he returned, you could bet that he was not going to be happy. Usually, this threatening view of a vengeful God seems very far removed from my life today, but sometimes it surfaces much closer than I’d like. Fundamentalist Christians still believe that people in our country, and throughout the world, are being punished at this very minute for refusing to follow God’s commands.

By now most people have heard about the football players from Mepham High School who were severely hazed and abused by older players back in August. A strange

twist arose a few weeks ago when a group of fundamentalists drove up from the Midwest to proclaim that what happened was God's judgment against the school for having tolerant policies toward students who were gay. How absurd and how hurtful for both the students and the community! I, for one, applaud the school's inclusive policy. But no matter your take on the issue of inclusivity, to say that God wanted those kids and their families to be hurt in order to teach the school a lesson is appalling. I could never believe that hate crimes are a result of God's judgment. I believe that they're the result of people using their God-given freedom to make terrible choices, including the choice to hate.

And despite today's scripture passage, I also don't believe that God wants us to live our lives in fear, anxious about what punishment God might send down next. So what then do I think is the point of today's scripture lesson? Instead of causing anxiety, I think that this passage is meant to heighten our anticipation. Instead of causing fear, this passage is there to encourage our faith. When we deal with apocalyptic literature, it seems best to avoid getting hung up on the details, most of which are codes, and instead to ask the question of why this passage was recorded in the first place. These passages were written during times of persecution and were meant to encourage believers. The overriding message is that God has not forgotten the sufferers and that the oppressors will not reign forever. The point is to encourage believers to keep the faith in difficult times because with God there is always hope, in this life and the next.

Jesus says straight out that when it seems like the whole world is falling apart, "...look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near" (21:28b). This wonderful sentence sums up the reason Jesus went into all of this vivid detail in the first place. The point of the passage doesn't rest in the apocalyptic images. The point comes from the promise that "redemption is drawing near." And that is the reason we observe Advent—to look back at that moment when redemption drew near to us in a humble Bethlehem stable, and to look forward to the day when our redemption will be complete, when we see God face to face. Jesus wants us to look forward in hope not despair, in glad anticipation, not paralyzing anxiety. When redemption first drew near, the angels' first words to the shepherds were "Fear not." "Fear not, for I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall come to all people." May the tidings of this season calm our fears, and bring us joy. May they remind us to use our freedom to choose love. And may they bring us ever closer to the redemption that draws near. AMEN.

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PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal God, in this holiday season anxiety rises in many of us. Old wounds over people we loved who are no longer with us, economic pressures brought on by unemployment or underemployment, the stress of having too much to do and too little time threatens to fill us with worry, fear, and doubt. Strengthen us by the power of your Spirit to overcome our anxieties and instead be filled with hopeful anticipation—the anticipation of celebrating Christ’s birth and of meeting the Spirit of Christ along life’s way. Draw us closer to you and to one another in these days of Advent. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.

ⁱ Each week there are four scriptures in the following categories: a general Old Testament reading, Psalms, Gospels, a general New Testament reading. The passages often relate to one another, at least in theme and follow the seasons of the church year.