

Jeremiah 33:14-16

Psalm 25:1-9

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Luke 21:25-36

We start Advent in the dark.

We are all too aware that we are living in a broken world. We see it every day and we hear about it every day. It's hard to tell whether life on the earth has gotten worse over the last two millennia, since Jesus walked the earth, or if our perception of brokenness is merely enhanced by the 24-hour news cycle that dumps torrents of horrible information into our lives whenever we let it. There was an earthquake just yesterday in Alaska that brought all the terror and destruction that we know earthquakes can produce. We've been watching wildfires in California that have destroyed thousands of homes and disrupted hundreds of thousands of lives and killed nearly a thousand people. In the last few decades we've had a front row seat for hurricanes and tsunamis, mudslides and volcanoes, floods and paralyzing snowstorms. The sun and moon and stars seem still to be aligned, so perhaps we have a bit more time before all Jesus' predictions come to pass. But many of them already have. Generations before us have seen nations rise up against nations in two world wars and the warring continues even in our own day. Our struggle to establish some kind of justice for all continues to be a struggle...just as it was in the days when Jesus walked the earth. Jesus came into a world of military occupation by an oppressive empire and squabbling among his own people about how they might secure release from the Romans and predatory practices by the religious leadership of the day. It wasn't so great in Jesus' day either.

Perhaps...just maybe...we are actually living in the middle of the apocalypse. Perhaps the end times began long before we were born. And maybe they will continue long after we have died. We have already figured out that God's sense of time and our sense of time is very different. Perhaps two thousand years is just the blink of an eye to God.

In the meantime, we are living in the in-between times. We are living with "already" but "not yet." We have already experienced God incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ. Through him we have gotten a glimpse of the Kingdom of God. Through him, we know something about that Kingdom and we know that it has come near to human beings through Jesus. He has shown us what God is like. He has promised us that when he left this earth in the Ascension, he was going to prepare a place for us. And we know from his life here on earth that Jesus keeps his promises. But we are also living in the time of "not yet." Jesus has not yet returned to the earth.

We are still waiting for that. And Jesus has described for us the signs we need to look for as we wait for his return. He just doesn't explain to us how long...in human terms...it is going to take. As we begin the Advent season, this first Sunday of Advent is the Sunday of Hope. When we lit the candle in the Advent wreath, we acknowledged that we start this season in the dark, but we have hope in the light...the light that is Jesus Christ.

As the season of Advent begins, we are making preparations. It is a time of getting ready. We are about to welcome the incarnation of God into the world in the form of the infant Jesus, not on a cloud as the Son of God when he returns, but as the vulnerable and powerless infant he was at the time of his birth. We are about to go back to the beginning...or what seems to us to be the beginning.

So what in the world was the gospel lesson about this morning? Why is Jesus talking to his followers about the end times...the apocalypse...the Parousia...when we're all scurrying around cleaning our houses, putting up Christmas decorations, buying presents, and getting ready for a big and joyous celebration? Jesus is talking about the end while we are getting ready for the beginning. Welcome to the world of paradox.

Jesus himself is just full of paradoxes. Christianity is full of paradoxes. Think about all that Jesus taught us. Not only does he ask us to continually do things that go against all our basic instincts...like being kind to people who are trying to hurt us and being servants when we are leaders...but he also teaches us about thinking in terms of 'both/and' instead of 'either/or'. A paradox is the presentation of two seemingly contradictory concepts and holding both of them simultaneously. It requires us to stretch our brains. It requires us to consider new possibilities. It makes us look at our world from different perspectives and to be open to the perspectives of people who disagree with us. Exploring paradoxes is one way we can start trying to figure out how to address the polarization in our lives right now that threatens to destroy the fabric of our common life. We need desperately to do that.

Paradox. Jesus knows all about that. How can he be in the world as the most vulnerable of human beings and also as the King of Creation? How is it that he preaches peace and then tells us that he has come to bring a sword to divide? How can he say to us that if we lose our lives we will gain them? How could his vulnerability be his strength? Why is it that he says the poor are blessed? In his wonderful little book, [The Promise of Paradox](#), the renowned teacher and social activist Parker Palmer tells us, "The way we respond to contradiction is pivotal to our spiritual lives." There's more going on in this world than meets the eye. Learning how to embrace paradoxes is a way to learn how to embrace each other. And they remind us that things are not always as they seem. There's more going on in this world than we often realize.

And so as we are making preparations, Jesus is telling us about the end. A paradox. He describes signs in the sun and the moon and the stars and distress among nations that are confused about the roaring of the sea. He's already explained to his disciples that the Temple...the great monument to God...would be destroyed. Not one stone upon another. Jerusalem will be trampled by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles have been fulfilled. The earth itself will be in such chaos that people will faint from fear. The powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then he tells us not to be afraid. That's easier said than done.

These are not the sorts of images that we want to contemplate while we are trimming Christmas trees and setting up our nativity sets. This is all terrifying. Why are we talking about the end when it is the season of the beginning? Because we have something to look forward to.

We are living in the in between times. We are living in the time that is "now" but also, "not yet." We are living with a Jesus who has walked this earth, died an earthly death, and came back to life. He has described for us the Kingdom of God. He has told us what we have to look forward to. He has assured us that he's gone to his Father's house...and *our* Father's house as well...to prepare a place for us. We will be with him...but not yet.

Even if the signs of destruction are all around us, Jesus assures us that we have something to look forward to. This is our Hope. This is what we acknowledge on this first Sunday of Advent. We have hope because he was here on the earth, he died, he rose from the dead, he ascended into heaven...and he has promised us that he will come back. We need not fear that day or all that goes with it. We can rest in the sure knowledge that Jesus always has and always will keep his promise. He tells us about the end times because he wants us to know what to expect. He wants us to be alert...to be watching...to be understanding what we are seeing, so that his return to earth will not catch us off guard or unprepared.

We prepare to welcome Jesus into the world as an infant knowing that when he returns it will be as the powerful Son of God.

Our hope in a broken world is the light that is Jesus Christ. He will eliminate the darkness. We look forward to his arrival.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.

