

Sermon 112915 Advent I
Scripture Isaiah 2: 1-4, Matthew 24: 36-42
Sermon Title- Judgment Day

I had a challenging conversation with someone recently. He challenged me on being a Christian Minister. He is a non-believer who was asking me how I could tell people to believe things that are impossible to believe. I asked him what he meant. He said, “You tell people that if they act a certain way that they will go to heaven and if they act in the wrong way, they will go to hell and you have no idea if that stuff is true or even can be true.” Now, despite the fact that he’s never heard or read a sermon of mine, and I’ve never said what he accused me of saying, he makes an interesting point.

Religious beliefs can be implausible, unbelievable, and downright ridiculous to non-believers. I didn’t mention this to that guy, but there are beliefs within one’s own faith tradition that are hard to accept. I think that many if not most believers pick and choose the beliefs that they are comfortable with and just ignore the rest of them. We are probably all more like Thomas Jefferson than we think. Jefferson famously tore up a few Bibles in order to put one together with only the passages that he was comfortable with. For many, the observance that we begin today, Advent, is one of those hard-to-imagine and maybe hard to accept religious

teachings. In fact, not all that many Christians even know what Advent is about.

The first thing that you might find hard to believe is that Advent is not about Christmas. Advent is not the liturgical season that anticipates Christmas. The fact that it falls just prior to Christmas is why many Christians think of Advent in terms of Christmas. We've just had what has come to be known as Black Friday, a day when Debit and Credit Cards endure vicious assaults, so the Christmas chaos has already begun. So separating Advent from Christmas is nearly impossible for some people to do. I will ask you to try to do just that for the next few minutes. Please try to separate Advent from Christmas for now so we can look at what Advent has to teach us.

Advent is a warning. Instead of looking back 2000 years like we do when we think of that holiday that we are not thinking about, Advent looks forward into the future. How far into the future we do not know. Jesus says in our lesson from Matthew's Gospel this morning, "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come." (24: 42) You might be asking, what does that mean?

Well, there is a belief that Jesus held and so did Paul who is the most important person not named Jesus in Christian history. Here is the belief. It is sometimes called 'The Second Coming' or

‘The Apocalypse’ or ‘The Rapture’ or ‘The End Times’ or “The Judgment Day.’ It is the belief that at some point the world will come to an end. When that happens, God will prevail, and the Christ will come to judge all the people who lived. The view is that the healing, loving, compassionate Jesus that the world has known will return as judge. Those of you who have spent time in churches like the Roman Catholic Church or the Episcopalian Church will recall the Doxology:

Christ has died,
Christ is risen,
Christ will come again.

Advent is about that doctrine. Now there are Christians that have this doctrine as the centerpiece of their beliefs. You might be familiar with the novels and movies that are known as the “Left Behind” series. These books depict a vision of what might happen in the end times. Our Fundamentalist Christian brethren are caught up in the notion of the Second Coming of Christ. They have a preoccupation with the last book in the New Testament, The Book of Revelation, because it is largely about this vision of the rapture.

History is replete with stories of people predicting this end of the world event to the exact date and time only to be disappointed or relieved, I don’t know which, when they were wrong.

Remember the group in purple Nike running shoes who committed

group suicide at the turn of the millennium thinking that it would be the rapture? So if this is an idea that you are prepared to just dismiss, just know that there are many who would think that you are the crazy one. Surely you could easily find someone who could ridicule some belief or beliefs that you hold.

Somehow we hope that the church will be the place where our hopes and beliefs that some would consider unrealistic are supported. We know that Jesus says that the meek shall inherit the earth but we do not believe that is likely, or likely in any reasonable time. But we like the words from Jesus with their comforting tone. We like to be reminded to be forgiving to those who have hurt us. But we also know that except in rare and wonderful circumstances, it is very difficult to bring ourselves to do it. But we come to church even when the lessons and messages don't stick even until fellowship time.

Even the beautiful and familiar passage from Isaiah this morning is lovely to think of even if we really don't believe it is going to happen: "He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore."
(Is 2:4)

So maybe all of this belief stuff is not a primary reason to come to church. Maybe you come to church to hear good words. Maybe you come to church to have more of a relationship with God. Maybe you come to church for the music, both the listening part and the singing along part. Maybe you come to church because you like the people here. Maybe beliefs are a back burner item for you.

Now, if you are expecting me to lay a guilt trip on you for picking and choosing beliefs or not living by the lessons from church, think again. I never try to tell you what to believe. You've heard me call us a 'seekers church' for people who are yearning for a closer relationship with God. There are no required beliefs here. We do not stand and recite a creed during worship. That is not my decision, by the way. I don't believe a creed has been ever spoken at Union Church. I did not decide not to say a creed but I agree with the decision. That is a reason I am comfortable in our denomination. I suspect that is true of you, too.

So you might not think of Advent in terms of the Rapture, or The Second Coming. But before you dismiss the notion off hand and say, "I don't have to believe that," consider this. My brother owned an engineering firm and did very well financially in his career. He sold the business for health reasons and has enjoyed a very comfortable retirement, since. He told his two children at one

point, “You might inherit a lot from me someday. But I strongly suggest that you conduct your life as if you won’t.” They heeded their father’s message. They are doing quite well, to say the least.

I am suggesting to you that although the Judgment Day may not happen, that you conduct yourself as though it will. Yes, I think the best reason to follow Jesus and live by his teachings is because it is the right thing to do, not because of potential rewards or consequences in the afterlife. Yet, we can grasp the concept of being judged because we have all already been judged many times in our lives.

So, if the notion of eternal judgment from God is a motivator for us to live by the word of God, then I’m all for this message of Advent. So what if today is Judgment Day? It could be. How do you think you’d do? Is there anything you think you should correct, or change, or repair? If you stood before God’s eternal judgment tonight at midnight, what might that judgment be? We don’t know how much time any of us has left. The truth is that the time of judgment is now.

Let me be clear. I’m not suggesting that you spend the next four weeks in somber reflection of your sinfulness and not enjoy build up to the Christmas season. By all means, trim your tree, and do whatever you do for Christmas. I’m suggesting both/and. You

are fully capable of both Advent reflection and Christmas spirit.

Now is the time. AMEN