

First Sunday of Advent – December 1, 2024
Luke 21:25-36

Pastor Chris Repp
Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

Advent is the season of anticipation. I have loved this season since I was a child, when we would put out the Advent candles on the dining room table in a homemade wreath of greens from trees in our yard, and we would eat our Sunday dinners in the dining room, where we never ate unless we had company. We would light those candles, one each week, until it was Christmas. It was a special time. Of course, as a child, the main thing about Advent was that it led to Christmas and, especially, Christmas presents. And in my family we got to have two present-opening sessions, one on Christmas Eve at my Father's parents' house, and one on Christmas Day at my mother's parent's house, each about a half hour away in different directions. But there was more than that. Christmas also meant at least a week off of school, and it often involved the visit of my parents' very good friends from Indiana, who had children the age of my sisters and me. We would all pile into my parents' house for three or four days around New Year's, which always included having our own version of a New Year's Eve party in the playroom of our house, just off the living room where the adults had their party. Looking forward to all of this was a large part of the charm of Advent for me.

I have not often appreciated that that kind of anticipation is what our readings actually point us to on the first Sunday of Advent. Honestly, in my years as a parish pastor I have mostly been annoyed at having yet another apocalyptic Gospel reading after several weeks of the same at the end of the previous church year. So, I have tended to focus instead on how the liturgical year wraps around on itself and prepares to take us once again through the major events of Jesus' incarnation, life, death, and resurrection. But when taken together, our three readings actually do give us this more expanded sense of the beginning of the new church year. So, let's have a look at them, a little out of order.

Our second reading from 1 Thessalonians reflects exactly the kind of Advent anticipation I remember from my childhood. Paul is here writing to members of a community that he helped to form, and is hoping to return to. This parallels the focus of this Sunday of the church year, which is always Jesus's return, and anticipating that as a good thing, an expected and hoped-for thing. It almost evokes the feeling of preparing to receive guests for the holidays, which was another big part of the Advent season, culminating with putting up the tree every year on the day before Christmas Eve. Paul's focus, though, with regard to the faith community at Thessalonica was to strengthen and encourage their growth in love for one another, love that would spill out into the world around them.

Our Gospel reading tempers that anticipation to some extent. Jesus' return will happen only in the wake of disaster, and the immediate disaster experienced by the Christian community that Luke was writing to was the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. It was their Pearl Harbor, their 9/11, but to a much greater extent than we can easily appreciate. We were on the winning side in World War II, and while 9/11 certainly change thing in this country – most notably air travel – we quickly got used to the relatively minor changes and have mostly forgotten that things were ever different. Yes, there was appalling loss of life on that day 23 years ago, but it was not followed by being conquered and occupied by those enemies. Still, as I said last week, we do not need to look for national disasters like those to shake us into an awareness that world as it is is not the world as it is meant to be. Sin and evil and death are much closer at hand than those increasingly distant memories, and not just in the realm on national politics, which has drawn so

much of our attention recently. Many of us have recent, painful experience of the death of loved ones, which has reminded us of the fragility of life and turned us again in hope to the promise that God is in charge of our endings, and is even now in the process of making all things new.

And that is also the assurance we find in our first reading this morning from Jeremiah. “The days are surely coming,” writes Jeremiah, when God’s promises will be fulfilled, when “Jerusalem will live in safety.” Jeremiah was writing those hopeful words to a community that was also experiencing disaster. They were living through the first time Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed by the Babylonians, some 650 years before the Roman sequel. To the people of Jeremiah’s time, many of whom were sent into exile in Babylon, and maybe also to the people of Luke’s time, who surely knew Jeremiah’s writing, these words must have seemed like fantasy, a childish dream. There was nothing in their experience of reality that even hinted at better days ahead, that there was anything to hope for. And yet the promise was made, and some of them trusted it, against all evidence to the contrary.

I’m not in the business of predicting the future. I pay attention to current events the same as you. I’m seeing the warnings about our overheated stock market and the possibility of a downturn in the economy. I’m hearing the dire warnings about climate disaster, about the rise of populism and totalitarianism around the world, and about the fragility of democracy in our own country. I’m reading about the ecological pressure of overpopulation and the potential for another, potentially more deadly global pandemic. Disasters loom everywhere you look. Will any of them come to pass? I don’t know. I pray that they don’t. “Save us from the time of trial,” we say every time we pray the Lord’s Prayer.

And this indeed is the point of giving us these texts today at the beginning of the church year on the first Sunday of Advent. Yes, the world is a mess. Yes, disasters happen, and there will be more coming, sooner or later. We can be real about that. But the underlying message that even I missed for many years is that God is calling us, in every situation, in the best of times and especially in the worst of times, to expect that God is still working in the world for good, and to look closer for signs that that is so. The response to difficult and challenging times is to remember, repeat, and by God’s grace to trust the promise that God has not given up on us. And so we do not need to give up on ourselves either, or on the world that God loves. We are given the opportunity instead of finding creative and faithful ways to live into God’s promised good future as agents and partners of God’s persistent love, to see the crises that inevitably arise not as occasions for despair but as opportunities to shine light into the darkness, to care for one another and the world around us, trusting that that care will not be in vain.

So, take heart, sisters and brothers in Christ. Our redemption is near, even already underway. May our hearts be opened to see the signs of Christ at work right now in the suffering of the world, and to anticipate with confidence that new life is in the works and about to burst forth. May that faith move and inspire us to be active in love and partners in God’s work for Jesus’ sake. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.