

First Sunday of Advent – November 29, 2020

Introduction

November 29th is the First Sunday of Advent. Advent is the time of waiting and preparation before our Lord's Nativity on Christmas Day that begins four Sundays before Christmas Day. The First Sunday of Advent opens the season with Jesus talking about the coming Kingdom of God and the judgment of the world. In today's sermon, you will find a brief discussion of the Church's fascination and speculation about 'the end.' We will also explore how to wait for the return of Jesus. Our Lord speaks words of caution and reminds his followers to focus on what is truly important: **God is in charge of history and our eternal destinies rest in God's loving hands.**

Final Pastoral Note

This meditation marks the end of our relationship. I have enjoyed my time as your intentional interim pastor. Much has been accomplished. Bethel and Immanuel Lutheran Churches are working together as a parish whose constituent congregations have come to understand that they are interdependent. Your church councils have provided input, and then approved, a strong Ministry Site Profile that is a comprehensive statement how you understand your ministry in your respective communities. You have also selected a parish call committee to interview clergy candidates. It is my prayer that you be successful in search for a pastor to walk with you on your journey of faith. Remember, you are God's church; you are not alone.

On a personal note, I have appreciated getting to know you. You have elected capable church councils to lead you in the days ahead. Jerry Lochner and Brian Lindgren have provided exemplary leadership in these uncertain times. May God be with you in the future.

**In Christ ✝,
Pastor Steve**

Gospel – Mark 13.24-37

Jesus said to his disciples: “²⁴But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, ²⁵and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. ²⁶Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. ²⁷Then 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.

²⁸From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹So also, when you see these things

taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁰Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. ³¹Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³²But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. ³⁵Therefore, keep awake — for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, ³⁶or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. ³⁷And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

'Waiting for the End'

Let us pray. Almighty God, you are the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. In you, the universe came into being; in you, it continues; and in you, it shall end. But still, thoughts of the end times trouble us. Dearest Father, you have revealed yourself as a God who redeems, not condemns. Help us to trust the promise of life guaranteed by our baptisms into the death and resurrection of Jesus. Send your Spirit upon us so that we might look with joy to the coming of your Son. But until that day, bless us with wisdom and strength so that we might walk in your ways. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen

Brothers and sisters, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I don't normally tell jokes about what people do for a living because you can never tell if they might be offended. But for some reason, people feel compelled to tell their pastor 'preacher jokes.' So I'm going to beat you to the punch — Here's my 'preacher joke.'

Did you hear the one about the two ministers standing by the side of the road? They were both standing by the side of the highway, each holding large sign. One read: 'THE END IS NEAR!' The other read: 'TURN AROUND BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE.' A short time later, a car slowed down and the driver and his passenger shouted all sorts of insults at the clergy. They said 'Be quiet . . . You're nothing but a couple of religious nuts.' A few seconds later, the ministers heard the sound of screeching tires and then a big splash. The one minister turned to the other and said, "Do you think

we should change our signs to read , ‘SLOW DOWN. THE BRIDGE IS OUT?’”

I know. You could see that one coming a mile away.

The ‘end of the world’ is a sensitive topic that evokes strong reactions. Some people are immediately skeptical; others are frightened; and still others believe everything they hear about the ‘end of the world.’ Such talk stirs up people and makes them uneasy. Media people who write headlines know that anything predicting doom will guarantee an audience.

Several months ago on the internet, I found a frightening headline on CNN’s Science page. It read: ‘RUNAWAY BLACK HOLE HEADS OUR WAY.’ Now that sounded serious. It began with the paragraph that read: ‘Today, astronomers spotted a black hole streaking through the Milky Way and approaching our nook of the galaxy. The super dense object is traveling through the galactic plane at 250,000 miles per hour . . . four times faster than the average speed of stars in the vicinity.’ Now, if you’d stopped reading there, you would think twice about buying groceries for next week or refinancing your home mortgage. Near the end of the article, a spokesperson for the Hubble Space Telescope added this disclaimer, ‘[It] will miss us by 1,000 light years . . . [and] will never get close enough to affect our solar system.’

Putting sensational headlines about black holes, meteors, and other such catastrophes aside, most Americans have been forced by recent history to give some serious thought to ‘the end of the world.’ The nuclear age has proven to be far less of a blessing than originally anticipated. When I was in elementary school, many believed that nuclear war was inevitable. I remember special drills where we were instructed to go to an inside wall, lay down, and put our hands over our heads. As a sophomore in high school, I remember the Cuban missile crisis when our navy was sent to intercept and board a Russian cargo ship carrying missiles bound for Cuba. My English teacher said ‘good bye’ because she didn’t think she would see us the following Monday at school. She was just repeating what the news services were saying. And who can forget the terrorist attacks of September 11th and the anthrax deaths that followed? Who can honestly say that they did not feel a bit uneasy about the world. It is not surprising that such events have spawned much talk about the ‘end of the world.’

But historically ‘end of the word’ talk is not unfamiliar to Christians. It has been around for a long time. The first generation of Christians to follow Jesus expected him to return momentarily. Their expectation was so strong that Paul counseled the Corinthians to forego marriage because there wouldn’t be time enough for family life.

But Jesus did not return. A thousand years later, Christians again expected Jesus to return at the end of the first millennium. They believed that the words of the Revelation to St. John were finally fulfilled. **But once again, Jesus did not return.** The pattern continues. Christians who claim to have a special insight into the mind of God and those who claim to have deciphered the ‘biblical code’ used by God and the prophets frequently make outrageous claims about the return of Jesus and the coming judgement. **But again, Jesus has not returned.** Not only do these false prophets look foolish, but they also diminish the credibility of God’s Word and those who follow Jesus.

In Latin, the word ‘adventus’ means ‘arrival or coming.’ When the early Church used the word ‘Advent,’ it referred to the coming of Christ to his people. However, Advent denotes two distinct events. **First,** it refers to the coming of Jesus as a baby born to Mary in Bethlehem. In this sense, Advent means the fulfillment of God’s promise by his Incarnation as a human being. **And second,** Advent refers to the coming again of Christ as Judge over the world. Here Advent implies preparedness and repentance. But paradoxically, the two Advents of Christ are one in the same. That which started in Bethlehem can only end when Jesus comes again in his glory.

On this First Sunday of Advent, we begin by looking at the end of the story. At first reading, today’s Gospel with its combination of bizarre ‘end of the world’ imagery seems to be a strange way to start the Season of Advent. One has to admit that Jesus’ words are a bit frightening. In the verses just before today’s Gospel reading from St Mark, Jesus says to his disciples, **“IN THOSE DAYS, AFTER THAT SUFFERING, THE SUN WILL BE DARKENED, AND THE MOON WILL NOT GIVE ITS LIGHT, AND THE STARS WILL BE FALLING FROM HEAVEN, AND THE POWERS IN THE HEAVEN’S WILL BE SHAKEN. THEN 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 THE HEAVEN.”**

The words, unsettling though they may be, are important. Jesus speaks with authority to those who await his return. What exactly does Jesus mean? Is it as obvious as the so-called ‘merchants of fear’ say it is? You know who I mean: those who preach judgment without grace and those who write popular novels that attempt to scare people into the Kingdom. I’m sick to death of hearing how ‘the good people’ are going to be raptured out of the world with everyone else left here to suffer. When I read this whole chapter [Mark 13], I hear Jesus comforting his disciples; promising

them that he will not abandon them in the times of trouble that will come as the world faces the final judgment for its sin.

The Evangelist Mark tells us that this whole discussion started when Jesus was in the Temple with those who followed him. One of his disciples commented on how impressive the Temple was and how fitting it was that God should be worshiped in such a magnificent structure. The Temple was the place of God's presence. And because God was present in this building, the people believe that they were secure.

You can imagine the disciples' surprise when Jesus said, 'DO YOU SEE THESE GREAT BUILDINGS? THERE WILL NOT BE LEFT HERE ONE STONE UPON ANOTHER, THAT WILL NOT BE THROWN DOWN.' A little later, Jesus sat with his inner circle of disciples — Peter, James, John, and Andrew. They were incredulous. **'Tell us,'** they said, **'Tell us when will this be, and what will be the sign when this will all be accomplished?'** It just didn't seem possible. *The Temple in ruins. . . How could God allow his magnificent Temple to be destroyed? And if God's Temple were destroyed, what of God's People? . . . What would happen to them?*

Unfortunately, Jesus does not paint a comforting picture with his answer. The Temple will indeed fall as will the city of Jerusalem. In the days that follow, false prophets and those pretending to be the Messiah will appear in the name of the Lord, shouting, *'The End is near!'* There will be wars and rumors of wars. Nations will arise against nations. There will be earthquakes, famines, and plagues. But Jesus reminds his disciples, **'THE END IS NOT YET.'** During this time of trouble, believers will be persecuted for their faith, they will be betrayed by family and friends, and they will be brought before the world's authorities to be judged. It will be a world of confusion and darkness. Jesus paints a picture of a world coming apart at the seams. His world . . . the disciples' world . . . and our world. **But the end is not yet.** When Jesus comes again, it will be *'like a thief in the night'* and not even his servants will know in advance the time of his return.

I think that it is human nature for those who follow Jesus, both past and present, to have questions . . . Questions of 'When?' and 'What does this mean for us?' Jesus chooses not to answer the first beyond telling his disciples to be prepared. The second is the real question. Those who follow Jesus have a right to know if his death and resurrection make any difference for those who wait for him. That's what the thirteenth chapter of Mark's Gospel is about: *Faith does not need proof, but it often needs reassurance.*

So what are Jesus' words for the Church today? What is Jesus saying to those who are genuinely concerned about the future? Three things, I think.

First, Jesus assures us that signs of the end are not predictable. What has happened in the past will continue to happen today and in the future. Those who follow God will continue to be odds with the world in which they live. The world will continue to resist the coming of the Kingdom. There will be signs; but signs visible only to those who have eyes of faith. Instead of signs that tell *when*; they are signs which tell the Christian, **'YOUR REDEMPTION IS NEAR.'** Beyond that, we can say nothing because God's timetable is his own. St. Paul reminds us that **'salvation is nearer than when we first believed; the night is far gone [and] the day is at hand.'**

Second, Jesus will come again. Time will not continue forever; history will have an end. But that end, the **'omega point'** as the French scientist and priest Teilhard de Chardin says, is Jesus. Jesus is the hinge point of history and he will reconcile the world to God.

And finally third, we must always be prepared for the end while living as if we have a million tomorrows. Physical death or the end of the world are essentially the same for the believer. Whichever happens first, we belong to God because we have been claimed in baptism.

So what do we do until the end? Remember my joke about the ministers at the beginning of the sermon? I think that we make two kinds of signs. The first sign should say, **'THE END IS NEAR! . . . TURN AROUND BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE.'** We must call the world to repentance bear faithful witness to the God who so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that all who believe in him should not perish but have eternal life. The second sign should say, **'SLOW DOWN. THE BRIDGE IS OUT!'** We are called to be servants in the world; doing what good that we can for the sake of those who suffer. Sometimes it means warning people about bridges that are washed out. At other times, it even means building new bridges so that people might be kept safe from harm.

So as advent begins, we wait; however, not as the world waits. We wait, not knowing what the future holds, but we wait knowing who it is that holds the future. Amen.