

The Nearness of God

Luke 21:25-36

Slide: Advent Candle

When I was a child, I remember fondly receiving a paper Advent calendar from my church. These calendars usually had a very vibrant picture on the front with little windows that you could open for each day counting down to Christmas. And, behind each window was a Bible verse. Each morning, my sister Carol and I would take turns to open a window. Today it seems like such a small pleasure, but the memory of it brings back what felt like simpler times.

God always felt near. God felt near at church, at home, at the Christmas tree. I looked forward to Advent because of this nearness. I remember the apple strudel, the spritz cookies I would make with Mom, the caroling with youth group, the Christmas Eve candle lighting, and the neighborhood Christmas lights.

Somewhere along the way, however, something happened and Advent changed. Things were not as simple as they seemed. Apparently, we were not a family of means and there were difficulties. It was well hidden from me that we were on food stamps and Christmas presents were difficult to save for, that my sister struggled with depression and my father died from cancer.

Advent ceased simply to be the season before Christmas, a simple countdown, of expectation, wonder and anticipation. Instead, it became a way to describe a kind of reality for life, a reality of the world we live in. Today's Gospel reading doesn't shy away from that world: war, earthquakes, famines, plague and betrayals – these realities took on new meaning for me as I grew into adulthood. I'm not fully sure when it did, but all the signs were there.

“There will be signs,” Jesus says. And with these signs, stand tall for God is near. That's a paraphrase, but essentially that's what Jesus is saying. He will draw near and come into the world with power when these signs occur.

But when are these signs, Jesus? What signs will make these things occur? The sign of an SUV plowing into a parade? The sign of airplanes crashing into towers, or wars in the Middle East; of signs with warming temperatures, floods, melting polar caps and a crisis of climate; of signs where chemo can't save you or long Covid comes. These signs? Are these the signs?

“There will be signs,” Jesus says. Then, the Son of Man will come near. Advent is both my favorite season and my least favorite, at least from a preaching perspective. It's full of hope but also mired in portents and future

ambivalence. This is a hard preaching, a difficult word. I sometimes wish Advent was as simple as opening a little door on the calendar and knowing that Christmas is one day closer.

But it's not. We all know it's not that simple or easy or true. Maybe that's why we need to hear these words of Jesus today. It admits to us that the signs are always there and the ending always seems near. This is not just a story about Jesus and his disciples or merely a prophecy of things that will happen later. They happen now. And, they have always happened, maybe not in this part of the world always, but somewhere. We experience the signs of Christ coming near in our lives. It's not just our neighbor who does. We do. And, today, the Church proclaims this to be the Good News, the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Because in the signs, Christ promises that he comes and will come again in glory; ok, perhaps not today, but it is near even if near to God is at a time beyond the shortness of our lives. And, Jesus says that if we simply but look we see them, these signs among the distress of nations; and in the roaring of the sea and its waves, then we will be awake enough to see his coming.

I certainly see the signs in our world today, in the refugees desperate in our world, in the countries that are fighting over resources and the scarcity

and inward thinking of our own selves, what's in it for us, what about me? These signs are not hard to spot.

However, I also think these signs are easy to misuse and are easily misunderstood. "There will be signs," is meant to be a word of hope from our Savior; but instead they are often used to frighten us into warning and threat, as if Jesus is predicting a future of doom and tragedy.

Suddenly, these signs become indicators of the terror we face and if we don't shape up, Jesus will come down here like Santa Claus with coal - you better be good or else! But, that fear, that terror only pushes us farther away from the coming of Christ with power and glory.

Jesus is giving a last minute lesson to his friends before he gets to Jerusalem, caught up in the nightmare of crucifixion, saying that the signs are there. They were there in his life. They were there at the sacking of the temple 40 years later by Rome. They were there during the crusades and the Black Death, World War I and the 1918 Flu pandemic. The signs are always there.

In fact, nowhere in this Gospel reading does Jesus even hint that this is about the end of the world, not even the end of something in particular. That's not here in Luke's Gospel. But, what is here is the beginning of something, the

beginning of new leaves sprouting from a dead fig stump, a word of hope – to lift your heads and stand up, for your redemption is near! If we but pay attention, stay alert, we can see the coming of Christ in our lives no matter how difficult or tragic our lives can be.

“There will be signs”, said Jesus. What signs are there in your life? Part of what is integral for the start of the Advent season is to keep awake for them, to know that despite all else, the tree, dormant as it may be now, is about to bloom. Likewise, to really hear what Jesus is saying today, we first need to enter the shadows, those places where all hope seems lost.

We have to listen alongside the traumatized, the desperate, the isolated, the heartbroken. Before we sing the “Joy to the World’s” and the “O Come All Ye Faithful’s”, we acknowledge that not all in the world is right. We need God to redeem this unfinished promise.

This Advent, to depict this theological and hopeful awareness, we have created an Advent table alongside the usual Advent traditions. Similar to the Advent wreath, what is different about this table is that each week it will change.

At present, it is a lifeless, dead gnarled branch. But each week it will grow into a beautiful garden of life. It represents a rebellion we believers share

against the hopelessness of the world’s signs, to proclaim that although tangible grief of this world continues, it ultimately points to the Good News of the nearness of God.

*“There will be signs,” Jesus said.
“Then 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.”*

Come, Lord Jesus, come near to us now and keep us alert, so that we may meet you standing tall. Amen.