



SUNDAY SERMON

Stand up and raise your heads

This week, looking toward the new church year that begins today, I'm reminded that after years as a member of faith communities, I find more and more of my relationships are with other people of faith. I have dear friends who are not Christian and some who are skeptical about religion. They are just as loving, compassionate, and committed to justice as the church people I know, and sometimes more so.

Yet there's one precious quality that distinguishes my relationships with other friends in faith: we share a readiness to dwell with mystery as a recurring aspect of life. We sense that in order to find meaning in our world, we need more than what can be known intellectually or explained by objective analysis. We want the mundane reality of earthly existence and time to be infused with the transcendent reality of God. We have not only a tolerance for mystery but perhaps a need to embrace mystery as an essential ingredient of our life experience.

And so for us, time itself feels different and takes on deeper meaning. In this hour we spend here together, past, present and future are blended. We look back to the Jesus of history as the cloud of witnesses has done for centuries before us. We look around with fellow seekers as witnesses to the lively presence of Christ in our midst today. And we look ahead with all who yearn for God's kingdom, witnessing to a divine promise coming in a future we struggle to imagine.

Living in God's time, we mark not only the world's 12-month calendar but a seven-season calendar of faith. Through these seasons --Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week, Easter and Pentecost-- the church invites us to recognize our limited life stories in the limitless story of God.

Advent makes us especially aware that dwelling with mystery is both a precious gift and a recurring challenge on our path of faith. This short season calls on us to imagine life in a world that Jesus has not yet come into, and life in a world where the risen Christ is at work in us, and life in a world to which Christ will return as savior and judge. Even for those who feel at home with the shifting perspectives of God's time, this is a lot of mystery to take in.

Advent offers a respite from the cultural and commercial phenomenon known as "the holidays", giving us a space for expectant waiting --but waiting for what? Advent, derived from a Greek term suggesting the coming presence of royalty-- probably began in the ancient church as a time of preparation for baptism. Its

continued

DATE
Advent 1
Sunday, Dec. 2, 2018

PREACHER
The Rev. David Griswold

Jeremiah 33: 14-16
Luke 21: 25-36

St. Columba's
EPISCOPAL CHURCH

St. Columba's is a welcoming Christian community that seeks to be open in spirit, deep in faith, rich in worship, active in service.

4201 Albemarle Street NW ■ Washington, DC 20016 ■ 202-363-4119 ■ Columba.org

focus was as much the return of the risen Christ as the birth of the infant Jesus. But I expect most of us have come to appreciate Advent as a pause before Christmas to ponder how God is present and to rediscover the mystery of the Incarnation.

I tend to approach Advent with my heart attuned mainly to the past and present reality of Jesus. I give thanks that God has come among us as a force for love and justice. I want to lean on Jesus for strength, to join in his healing work, and to be worthy of the blessings that fill my life. I want to be ready to meet Jesus at the manger, to follow him to the river Jordan and then through Galilee to Jerusalem, and to participate in the risen life of Christ. I look to Advent as a time to clear my heart of all the clutter that holds me back on that journey with Jesus.

And so this first Sunday of Advent can seem disorienting, even unsettling. We've sung O Come, O Come Emmanuel in joyful anticipation that God's faithful will be rescued from trouble. We have heard the prophet Jeremiah reassure a broken people that a righteous king is on the way. But before we can turn our gaze to the stillness of Bethlehem or listen for John the Baptist announcing our savior's arrival, today's gospel takes us to the future reality of Jesus. We're with Jesus at the end of his earthly ministry and his parting message is a disturbing warning about cosmic turmoil, distress among nations and a people gripped by fear as they face a day of reckoning.

This isn't the gentle invitation to Advent that might have been expected today. Preparing to reflect on the meaning of Jesus' arrival as an infant born in a stable, we are confronted with the mature Jesus talking of his return as "the Son of Man...in a cloud with great glory?" (27). As I prepare to say hello to Jesus, he is saying goodbye and beware. As I try to fathom the mystery of his first coming, Jesus points to a second coming when he will hold us to account for the condition of God's creation.

This makes Advent seem more complicated than I want it to be, and truth be told, I have not found the idea of a second coming very nourishing to my faith. The promise of Christ's return and a time of judgment are basic tenets of Christianity and part of our creed. Yet the Bible offers imagery that makes these ideas hard to grasp and, for some, easy to dismiss.

I need to remember that Luke is writing to a beleaguered community that expects Jesus to return, but lives in anticipation of an end time and with the constant fear of persecution by imperial Rome after the destruction of the temple. Luke renders Jesus' message in apocalyptic language familiar from Hebrew scripture, depicting the end of world history and the arrival of one anointed by God to bring divine justice.

Christians have long been divided about how to interpret such passages in the gospels: some look to a visible public re-appearance of Christ that will bring an evil world to an end and usher in a new era of peace. Others, including, I expect, most Episcopalians, understand the second coming in a more spiritual sense, expecting a returning Christ to work through the faithful with renewed purpose to overwhelm the forces opposed to God.

It is tempting to dismiss talk of the second coming as having little value for us in this 21st century Advent. But as people who are at home with mystery, we learn to listen for good news even when Jesus' teachings seem stern and elusive. Perhaps we can't relate to Luke's vision of a cataclysmic end time when we will stand before Jesus. But we can think about what it means to live as his disciples in the meantime. For within this oracle of imminent destruction and chaos lies an empowering summons.

We experience signs of stress in our world, in our own hearts and in the lives of people around us. In the midst of turmoil and uncertainty, the kingdom of God can seem impossibly distant. But Jesus calls us to witness to its nearness. "Stand up and raise your heads," he says, "...be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with...the worries of this life (28, 34)."

He is not telling us that our challenges, setbacks and mistakes don't matter, only that we mustn't let them distract us from seeing evidence of blessings and growth around us. He is telling us to live as people of hope. Perhaps Jesus is no more aware than we are as to how and when we will come face to face with him and when the transformation of the world will be complete. But we know transformation has begun through him, and Jesus looks to us keep it going, to embody in all our relationships the evidence of God's love for the world.

As I wait this Advent to resume my walk with Jesus, it is humbling to ask myself: do my friends -- Christian and non-Christian-- recognize me as a person of hope? There are days when I expect they don't. To live always as a people of hope is a demanding expectation for us all. Yet what I understand about God tells me that while times of darkness and defeat are inevitable, they never have the last word, which is perhaps the biggest mystery of all. Hope is the outlook Jesus draws me to embrace for myself and to impart to others.

Hope is also present in the signs of God's nearness that sprout every day in this community of faith. We may have lost the Columba Oak this past year, but the fig tree Jesus talks about is continuing to bud here in our midst with signs that God's kingdom is flourishing.

As Martin Smith has written, "Hope is the very core of Christian identity. I am not who the past dictates I am...I am not what others have decided I shall be...To live in hope is to know that I am who I am becoming....Christ in me makes continual space for newness within me."

Let us discover that space for newness in the mystery of this Advent.

Amen.

p.s.: Book cited: Martin Smith, *Nativities and Passions* (Cambridge, MA, Cowley Publications, 1995) p. 185.