

SERMON

**Guest preacher: Carolyn Hetrick
Sunday, December 2, 2018
Advent 1**

It is a joy to be in your midst and here with a colleague and friend I have known for almost 12 years now. Michael and I met now “Pastor Schul” at Seminary weekend In Gettysburg, and I knew right away when I met him, that he’s really smart. This was confirmed for me when we talked about a day for me to preach and he suggested, why don’t YOU preach the first Sunday of Advent? Luke’s heartwarming kickoff to the “most wonderful time of the year” greets us with “Distress, fainting and woe.”

For those of you in education at the end of an academic term, and you parents, Luke’s distress and fainting and woe may feel too real. Not seemingly the word of comfort you seek in these days.

Where’s the part of the Gospel of Luke from “Merry Christmas, Charlie Brown” with Linus standing in the spotlight with his security blanket recounting the beautiful narrative of the Nativity?

It’s December, and we really would rather have an invitation to the baby shower. In these weeks we say are preparation, that’s the Advent we want to prepare for. To light the candles and envision the joy of a new life.

It’s easy to push aside another aspect of Advent - that we not only celebrate the historic birth of Jesus, that babe in the manger, but also that “Christ will come again.”

It doesn’t get a heartwarming TV special. But we are waiting for that too. When I say that, some folks, being honest at this point in the season, have said, “if Jesus IS coming again, can’t he wait for a more convenient time?” Our focus these days is our parties and plans, and some of us even have all that shopping done or it’s well under way.

The exception for me was the year I had failed calculus as a 1st semester freshman when I was sure that if Jesus would just hurry up, I wouldn’t have to tell my parents at Christmastime. Distress, fainting and woe.

Today we hear of Christ coming again in a way that makes us perhaps want to clutch our security blanket and put our head down amidst words like: “Anxiety and fear, disturbance in the skies, roaring seas, surging waves.” And in Jeremiah, in the verses leading up to today’s reading, it’s been said:

“You and your people are saying, things are desolate, they are in ruins! Destroyed by wars. People and animals live there no more.”

I'd like to suggest that these words speak not so much a doomsday prediction of what WILL come; rather, they're a statement of the life we already see amidst that breaking news cycle we want to escape that is the oft repeated story of humanity. Some know it all too well, desperately praying for justice and that Jesus will hurry up and come.

And yet...in the midst of this, no matter our situation, we are quite clearly commanded to expectation. The question is - what kind? How does it end? Jeremiah has already said, happy sounds will again be heard. Joy, gladness, celebrations. And today - restoration and salvation and security. We could long for that promise any day.

Jesus says: Rise up. Raise your head! The Son of Man is near. God's promises WILL be fulfilled. Advent anticipates Christ will return to complete kingdom work totally. Remember it is to bring new life on earth. To redeem and restore. And in this Kingdom already begun, We are also called to see the Son of Man drawing near to us- In the here and now in glimpses of that same kingdom. To be strengthened by it. To be ready for it, to pray for it, and to work for it however we can.

A delightful older saint helped me see that. She'd once been an energetic corporate secretary, sharp as a tack with piercing bright blue eyes. Only in her nineties did she decide to stop reading the Smithsonian magazine because it'd finally become “too technical.” She'd outlived her husband and almost everyone else she knew.

After breaking a hip, she gave up driving. Thankfully, her extended family provided a beautiful condo. Meals on Wheels brought her food, a transport service got her to doctor's appointments. And on occasion, we took her out to the Olive Garden for lunch where they knew her standing order.

To some it seemed that her whole world had shrunk to the size of that condo. But she was determined to live in hope. And each day she rose, dressed impeccably. Up and ready for her mission - to pray for those she loved and the world. And to check on her neighbor across the hall. She ANTICIPATED each day.

Then one day she fainted. And fell again. And after that it sort of seemed like things just began to unravel. She ended up in the hospital with news that was not promising.

All the machines and tests confirmed - her world had been shaken a little too hard this time.

Some might say that in her nineties, what more could she expect.

It would've been easy to be discouraged, or anxious.

Where once she'd moved with purpose and determination, when I went to visit her, she could barely raise her head. She apologized for the state of her hair. Of all things. And then acknowledged that it looked like this might be the end.

But with sudden vigor, she tried to sit up. I saw the bright sparkle in her eyes just one more time as she said, "You know, I am not worried about where I am going! That I know. God has promised!

I just wonder, what it will be like getting there? I just wonder..."

I stood in wonder and awe of her sense of expectation. She was prepared.

She absolutely expected the Son of Man drawing near to come to her. In fact it had become her prayer. Redemption and hope, not despair. The joy of new life.

Our gospel proclaims that we should expect that God in Christ comes NEAR.

That is hopeful not just for "some day," but now. God with authority and power and purpose comes to us. And when things seem shaken up, it doesn't just mean all heck is breaking loose, but that God is breaking through the struggles of this world to come to us.

Bringing the kind of things we pray for and work for. The ones we should expect: Your kingdom come - on earth as in heaven. For all of the places that feel insecure and overwhelming, especially in this season, in our expectations and in our world, our antidote is not to just live in fear. Nor should we just bury ourselves in another round of "We Need a Little Christmas, right this very minute!" As fun as that can be. God's words call us to a greater and lasting expectation.

God hears our prayers and brings a word of hope and fulfillment now to sustain us through what we cannot yet see. So "Rise early and pray," Jesus says. May your day be prepared in God's words. Because it is so easy to be distracted. In the face of it all, our expectation matters.

God hopes we expect new life, grounded in a God of grace and promise.

As we enter this season of Advent, may it be a time when what we expect continues to transform us- so that we prepare ourselves and our world in hope.

To rise up and pray and walk together believing the good news of Christ IS drawing near- ALWAYS God's word for us. Spoken by the same God who long ago said through the prophet Jeremiah: "I love you with an everlasting love.

That is why I am faithful to you."

**Jesus reminds us- that even when it seems like everything is passing away,
none of these words will.**