

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church Pinole, CA

First Sunday of Advent: December 1, 2024

Both/And for Advent

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Good morning and welcome to Christ the Lord Church on this first Sunday of Advent. As we hear today's Gospel we hear judgment, terrors, and cosmic signs of the end times. This might seem like a strange way to begin the season of Advent. After all, Advent is a time to prepare our hearts in joyful anticipation of Christ's birth. How can this apocalyptic end-time prophecy of Jesus coming "with power and great glory" prepare us for Jesus coming as a helpless infant? During Advent, we celebrate God-with-us — the Emmanuel - who comes into the world. Why begin this season with talk of "fear and foreboding of what is coming on the world"?

Starting the season of Advent by reading this Gospel (I will also reference some previous verses in Luke) allows us to bring multiple contrasts into view: The "signs" that will prefigure the risen Jesus are juxtaposed with the "sign" that is the infant Jesus himself. Power and glory on the one hand, with humility and helplessness on the other. A warning that the "nations" will be "distressed" and "anxious" set alongside a message of "good news of great joy for all the people." As odd as it might seem to draw these contrasting images together, there is wisdom in it.

Parker Palmer, a theologian and activist, writes in his book *The Promise of Paradox*, "The way we respond to contradiction is pivotal to our spiritual lives." Paradox requires "both/and" instead of "either/or" thinking. One dictionary defines paradox as "a statement or proposition that *seems self-contradictory* or absurd, but in reality, expresses a possible truth." Keeping space for paradox is difficult, especially in America today. The country is polarized, often reflecting either/or logic: "If you're not with us, you're against us".

This Advent, after climate change has intensified hurricanes, floods, and fires; after another American election cycle; another year of war in Ukraine; and more spreading conflict in the Middle East; after growing polarization and rising radical political movements around the world; there is much that seems worse than ever before. It's as though everything that does not belong to the Kingdom of God is in rebellion, trying to shake the gates of heaven by damaging the things God loves here on earth.

And when it looks this way, Jesus says, we are to “stand up and raise our heads, because our redemption is drawing near.”

Destruction, death, and betrayal are coming, but hope is there in the midst of it all. Earthly trials and tribulations are portrayed as temporary and vindication for God's chosen ones. Their redemption, Jesus teaches his disciples, is near. Through *Both suffering and comfort*.

I cannot remind you enough that God has never promised anyone smooth sailing through their lives. For some who may look like they have it all together, there may be inward struggles we never know about. For those who look like their lives are a hot mess, they may be experiencing a peace that others may only dream about. God does not promise a rose garden, but he does promise hope, comfort, and ultimately peace.

Advent is a season of change, letting go, and looking to a future that was not yet clear or known. When all is said and done (if that is ever the case), if we are to find ourselves as the last generation, we may find ourselves saying when it is done, I'm not exactly sure when it began or how it happened but I know it did. All the signs were there.

The fact that the Son of Man is coming with power and glory does not change the reality of hardship. Even as we consider the Son of Man himself, we soberly realize that hardship was his constant companion. In fact, Jesus warned repeatedly that we would have hardships as we waited. Yes, the Advent story has a Merry Christmas ending, but

if we are telling the truth as Christians, then we must also say that the ending is still being written.

As we move into the Christmas season, let us not get so myopic in single-mindedly over-preparing for Christmas that we forget God's vision for the world — a vision that is God's to control, a vision that is far broader and more expansive than either/or thinking can allow. What is at stake is not just another annual celebration or making Christmas memories with friends and family. What is at stake is the coming of the kingdom of heaven, which, Jesus reminds us, is both already and not yet here.

I stand before you, as many other priests and prophets have stood to remind you that the end times has come and gone before, just ask those from previous generations. We are losing most of our WWII generation who will tell you that the world has ended and began many times. For all the sufferings of the past, there always lies a future with hope. We may never live long enough to see Jesus coming in a cloud, but we are promised to see him face to face in those around us and when we are called home with all the saints.

Welcome to Advent where the end and the beginning, where destruction and hope can live together in expectation of a brighter future with God among us. Amen