

Advent 1C 28 November 2021  
Luke 21:25-36  
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth  
Greg Bensted

Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars....” Let's pray:

Living betwixt and between. It's a state of being where your life seems to be trapped in suspended animation. You know your past and that you have a future, but you experience a numbness that keeps you frozen in a particular moment. This anecdote may help:

My best mate, Christopher, is a police officer in Queensland. Enforcing the law can be a dangerous job, and many officers are left scarred both physically and mentally. People who work together in dangerous circumstances become very tight-knit and bonds between them and their families grow strong. One incident that plagues Chris's memory is the day his police partner was killed by a criminal while they were on duty. I can't imagine my mate's grief. He took to the water on his surfboard and sat off the Gold Coast, day and night for two days straight, stunned by the horror of what he'd experienced.

In such idyllic surrounds, surfers are normally mesmerised by the last colours of the setting sun fading into the coming night, the moon rising and stars beginning to twinkle. Most normal people are also acutely aware of shark feeding time. But Chris simply couldn't appreciate the beauty of the setting sun. I doubt that he was even aware of its presence. Darkness seemed to overshadow the moon's light, the stars offered no bearing, and he couldn't care less about sharks. The loudest sound was silence and the only feeling, numbness. Chris was living betwixt and between what had happened and an uncertain future.

We're now in the Season of Advent and I don't only mean the four Sundays before Christmas. Advent is much more than that. Advent is that in-between time of waiting, uncertainty, and darkness, where we stand on the threshold,

disoriented, existing in that liminal no-mans-land between the conscious and unconscious state of being, existing but not feeling, neither here nor there, betwixt and between, stuck in the middle. The past church year is over, but Christmas celebrations aren't yet. Advent is that season in which life as we knew it no longer exists and the new life to come doesn't yet exist. It means we live in transition, knowing that everything has changed and is changing but the way forward is shrouded in mystery. So, we wait and we watch, like my mate bobbing up and down on his surfboard in the ocean swell.

So, what are your Advent stories? Waiting and watching at the bedside in the hospital, a time when you realised your marriage wasn't what it used to be and you weren't sure what it would become or if it would even last? Maybe it was the death of a loved one, or watching your child struggle while growing up? Perhaps the loss of a job, a business failure, financial challenges? What about now? Maybe your family affairs resemble more of an episode of *Dynasty* than *The Waltons*.

Whatever it might be, we become aware that life as we planned it hasn't panned out as we'd hoped, and we lose the sense of who we are or where we're going in life. Welcome to the Season of Advent. The uncertainty of a diagnosis or knowing the diagnosis but not the prognosis takes us into Advent. The global economy, the war against disease, life as we emerge from lockdown, the lingering wounds in our Church tied to the old ELCA/UELCA apartheid, all reside within the Season of Advent. It's not like it used to be and we're left wondering what the future might hold.

Today's gospel reminds us that Advent isn't just a season of the church year; it's a reality of life. Jesus takes the disciples into the Advent of their lives. The disciples admire the temple and the large stones. Jesus tells them that change is coming and it'll feel like the world is falling apart: you'll hear news of wars, insurrections, earthquakes, famines, plagues; some will be arrested and persecuted; some will be betrayed, hated, even put to death; there will be signs in the sun, moon, stars and on earth distress among nations; you'll be scared to death over what's happening. Sound familiar? It sounds a lot like what I see and hear on the news every day. It's exactly like real life and it's a pretty good description of what it's like to live in the midst of significant change, in times of uncertainty, in the threshold moments of life.

Advent causes us to ponder prickly questions and offers few answers. Will everything be, okay? Will I be, okay? Will those I love be, okay? When will all this happen and what will it be like? Where can I run to? Where can I hide? Where will I be safe? Jesus, show me a sign that everything'll be okay! And the older we get, the more we want to go back to what it used to be like. But we can't do that. God doesn't mull over the past. God doesn't undo what's happened in our lives. Rather, God redeems what's happened in our lives. Advent is about the coming redemption, the coming of our Saviour and our salvation.

Hence, in contradiction to our anxieties, Advent is about Good News. Whenever we experience an Advent moment in our lives, it is disconcerting, it does make us uncomfortable – I get that. But those moments carry with them, a proclamation. They proclaim that our redemption is drawing near. The season of waiting, of unknowing, and darkness is also the season in which our redemption is drawing near. God draws us nearer to his grace, his love, his perfection, the completion of his saving work in Jesus Christ – our Lord, our Saviour, our Love, and our Life.

And “there will be signs”, Jesus says. This is not an invitation to be alarmed, saints. The signs are where some people focus unnecessarily, but understandably, on the spectacular. Words like distress, confused, faint, fear, foreboding, worries aren't exactly soothing, are they? But we need not be afraid. Jesus tells us that the signs will be as ordinary as a fig tree sprouting leaves, an indication that spring is in the air and that summer will follow as surely as day follows night. Signs as common as the patterns of life we know and see every day. Jesus seems to be saying that we'll know them when we see them. They'll be signs of light, new life, and growth. Let's not waste our time anxiously trying to forecast the signs, rather, let's wait patiently and confidently for Jesus, our Saviour, to come with power and great glory to be with us.

Saints, Jesus doesn't call us to forecast our future or to worry about our lives. He calls us to live faithfully – here, now, in this place, in this moment – in this Season of Advent. We're not predictors, diviners, or seers of the faith but practitioners of the faith. We're loved followers of the One who's name is Love; the One who creates faith. The way through this Season of Advent and

into the future, into our ever-coming redemption, is to live simple lives of Jesus-focused faith in the present.

Stand up and raise your heads, be on guard, stay alert, and pray. These are the practices of an Advent faith. This is the faithfulness to which Jesus calls us. They're simple practices and yet, at times, I know they can be some of the most difficult work we ever do.

I'd like to leave you with another image that might help. Back to the ocean. As a child, I used to go fishing a lot with my dad. I particularly enjoyed fishing from a boat at night. The air was balmy, fish were plentiful, and the night sky resplendently punctuated by the stars of the Milky Way. Had I only looked down and worried about my unfinished homework while waiting for a fish to bite, I would have missed the wonder of fireflies zooming about and the thrill of shooting stars trekking across the universe. I was blessed to see these things so often, that they became a routine part of my formative years.

Friends, we don't get to determine the timing, circumstances, or conditions of our Advent. However, we are invited to stand up, raise our heads, be on guard, be alert, and pray. As we rely more and more on those practices, we'll discover that we're no longer looking for signs. Our very simple lives of faith founded on Christ's unchangeable promise will be the sign of redemption drawing near.

The world will do what it will, but by the love of Abba, the grace of Jesus, and the encouragement of Holy Spirit, we will stand boldly on the hope we have, we will fix our gaze on the coming glory of Jesus, we will receive the strength to overcome all obstacles to the completion of our salvation. Our only work is to stay focused on Jesus, our destination; God will take care of the travel plans. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.