

Gathering In Anticipation

The First Sunday of Advent

Luke 21:25-36

Sunday, December 1, 2024

By Rev. Dr. Chris Keating

Jesus' words seem like a strange way to begin Advent. We might have expected the familiar words from Luke, chapter two, "In those day a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered." Or perhaps we hope to hover over Bethlehem like a drone, catching a glimpse of shepherds overwhelmed by the sight of the host of heaven, or a young girl giving birth in a stable.

This morning, we are greeted with the words of a grown up Jesus, not the tender wriggling, red face of a newborn. We are met not with a mother who reaches down to nurse her child, but with a stern-faced Jesus who is about to face crucifixion. Church is not the place where you are going to find cheery greetings of "Merry Christmas" this first Sunday of Advent. You are not going to find Mariah Carey standing up in church this morning to belt out her classic anthem, nor will you find the Trans-Siberian Orchestra tuning up their electric synthesizers.

Today all we hear are the sounds of an unplugged, and perhaps even unpleasant apocalyptic warning: "The days are sure coming," says the Lord, "when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah."

The problem, writes Joan Chittister, is not that Christmas has become too commercialized. She reminds us that we're a consumer society no matter what the season. The problem is we've drained the moment of Christmas of its meaning. We've exhausted the potential of Christmas, robbing it of its greatest strength. "Your redemption is drawing near," says Jesus, but somehow we've become weighed down by the worries of the world. Somehow, the mystery of the creche has become nothing more than an event requiring special effects and a light show.

We have wrapped ourselves in stories of Christmas as an event: a season of unending joy, glad tidings, peace on earth. That is the song we want the herald angels to sing. That is the glorious song of old we long to hear.

And then Jesus comes along and ruins it all with these strange words which are frequently misinterpreted and often make no sense.

The late Richard Gaillardetz sums up the challenges we face at Advent in a recollection from when his son was young. One December morning, Gaillardetz, who taught theology at Boston College, was getting ready for work. Rushing around the house, he was stopped by his then two-and-a-half-year-old son. His son was wearing only a diaper and was clutching a bottle of milk like a royal scepter. Gaillardetz says, “He looked at me, and in a triumphant voice proclaimed: ‘Jesus is coming!’ But before I could congratulate myself for having done such a fine job teaching my son about Advent, he immediately followed that proclamation with a second: ‘Go! Go! Power Rangers.’ And with this solemn invocation of the superheroes of the day, he did an about-face and marched back into the living room.”

Gaillardetz muses that here is the challenge we face at Advent: a confrontation between the words of our faith and a culture that remains tone deaf to the values of Advent. With Thanksgiving leftovers still sitting in the refrigerator, and fall decorations lingering around our houses, we plunge headfirst into Christmas, yet somehow miss the importance of a season that has less to do with buying and wrapping than it does with being and hoping.

Jesus’ words were remembered by Luke as he retold the promise of God’s redemption. When a generation had passed and all those things had not yet taken place, believers naturally became concerned and worried. Had they missed something? Luke’s audience knew of the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70. His gospel resounds not only with the promises of Jesus, but with echoes of the Old Testament. He knew the desolation that people had faced, and the terror which had accompanied their lives.

This is the word Luke offers. He writes to Christians who have faced upheaval and the staggering pain of loss. He writes to those who knew the history of the conquest of Jerusalem and whose lives had been lived under the shadow of dictators and emperors. Desolation has indeed come near. They lived with the fear of seeing the world shake with the powers of heaven.

And if that sounds familiar, then also recall the promise with which we are called to live during Advent. Jesus reminds us, “Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

But he also knew the promise of Jesus. He will tell us that promise, over and over again. It is a word spoken to the shepherds, and a word spoken to Mary. “Do not be afraid.” Indeed, Jesus’ words today remind us that in the midst of our own struggles of pain and grief, worries we are to stand up, and trust that our redemption is drawing near.

Redemption sounds a bit strange, particularly for those whose lives are comfortable, who have most of the things we want, who have not been unjustly accused or robbed of our dignity. Yet even if all of that has been true, we know that there are moments when we fall prey to worries that haunt us and anxieties that push us. We know that the time crunch of society has indeed pushed us to a place where our lives may feel as if they are on a treadmill, going nowhere fast.

In a place we may be afraid to admit even to ourselves, we yearn for that promised assurance that God will come to us. God delights in us so much that the barriers of heaven proved insufficient to keep God from dwelling among us. God yearns for us, loves us, and so God comes to us.

That is the mystery and power of Advent. We are waiting for that child who has come to come once more. And we wait with hope.

We wait with hope that inspires us to do the things Jesus taught us: to live with compassion, to bring healing to those who are struggling. We go about the work of being the body of Christ in this world, living with mercy and extending the joy of redemption to all people—including those with whom we do not agree, or those whose lives we do not understand.

Here’s the invitation I want to offer you this Advent. Give Advent your full attention. So much of the Christmas season is a distraction. So much time, energy, and frankly, money, is spent caught up in what could be called preparing for the event of Christmas that we miss the radical surprise of God’s coming to us. God is looking for you! God is yearning to share your life, to remain with you. But not just you: God is coming to the entire world.

Advent reminds of the great mystery of faith: Christ has come, Christ has died, Christ will come again.

Come, O Come, Emmanuel.

Come into a world that is chaotic and confusing. Come to us when our lives are torn apart by suffering. Come to us in the struggles we face: our battles with illness, our fears, our internal wrestling matches. Come to us, o Come to us, Emmanuel. Offer to us the assurance of Jeremiah, and bring to our world justice and righteousness.

Go with me as we trudge down the basement steps in search of our Christmas creche. The box is down there, buried under the piles of decoration and a layer of dust. Inside are the figurines of Joseph and Mary, the Baby Jesus, probably a shepherd or two. The magi are given their royal deference and are wrapped separately. Along with a camel and some sheep and maybe an oxen or a donkey, these are the characters of the creche.

We take them from their boxes and carefully arrange them. Over the years, their plaster faces have been chipped and the paint worn thin. The barn is a bit bent from a collision with a stuffed reindeer in the box of decorations. But it still stands, and with it all the other characters. In some years, there have been extra guests stopping by the nativity: an occasional Star Wars figure or perhaps even Barbie came to worship the newborn king.

Inside, Mary and Joseph and the others stand in silent remembrance of Jesus' birth. They have stood by as our families have changed: new babies were added, while dear loved ones were missed. The drama of our family life mixes with the drama taking place in this incarnational moment.

Here God dwells with us: in our sadness, and in our joys. Here God calls us to wait with anticipation and hope, eagerly trusting that the one who came, who lived and dwelled with us, will come again. Even so, come, Lord Jesus. Amen.