

Advent I, December 3, 2006
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Mullens, WV
Luke 21:25-31 – There will be signs in the sun

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From the Gospel: *“There will be ...distress among nations. ... People will faint from fear and foreboding... .”*

What a strange way this is to greet the first Sunday in Advent – the season of the church year that leads us into Christmas, the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Here we are preparing for his birth, and we're reading an end-time gospel.

Now I think many people will hear the lessons today with considerable fear. It's little wonder: the Old Testament lesson is the description of the Day of the Lord, which is apocalyptic, and the psalm berates us for our short-comings. Then there is this gospel: “There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory.”¹

It is clearly a description of the second coming, the time when we believe that Jesus will return, and, to use the words of the Apostles Creed, “He will come again to judge the living and the dead.”

Now it would be easy enough to preach a good old-fashioned “hell-fire and damnation” sermon on these texts. But I say to you that doing so would not be faithful

¹ Luke 21:25 ff NRSV

to the real Gospel message, either in its general terms or in the specifics of these lessons.

With regard to the end time, there are three things we are called as Christians to remember:

First, Jesus clearly tells us that we will not know when that final judgment will occur. We are told simply always to be prepared. Not to make light of it, but it's a bit like the times your mother told you always to wear clean underwear in case you were in an accident and had to go to the hospital. Jesus tells us that we should try at all times and in all places to be prepared for him to come again. But there is no point to watching for the signs and trying to predict the day of his coming. We will not be able to do so.

Second, we are commanded not to judge one another – that is a task reserved specifically to God himself. So there is no point to trying to decide who gets into heaven and who doesn't (and indeed there is every reason to believe that everyone gets in, but that's a topic for another day).

Third, we are told that salvation – surviving the judgment day – is not something we will earn through our own acts. It is instead something earned for us by the suffering and death of Jesus, and through his grace bestowed on us. It is a completely un-earned gift of incalculable value.

In light of these three things, today's lessons make clear that we have, to borrow from Franklin Delano Roosevelt, “nothing to fear but fear itself” when it comes to the final judgment. St. Paul tells the church at Thessalonica “¹² ...may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for

you.¹³ And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.”²

And in St. Luke’s Gospel, Jesus clearly expects that we should await his coming in glory with thankful, not fearful, hearts. He says “²⁸Now when these things [meaning the signs in the sun and the moon and the stars] begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”³

If God is love, and indeed we believe he is, and if the first and greatest commandment is that we shall love the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our mind, and the second is that we shall love our neighbors as ourselves, and if we have tried to live these commandments, then I tell you that there is nothing to fear when God judges the world. God in Jesus Christ has already paid the price for our salvation. So much for hell-fire and damnation!

But why are we hearing this on the first Sunday in Advent? What does the end of the earth have to do with the birth of a child in Bethlehem over two thousand years ago?

The answer, of course, is that the reason we can approach the end time with confidence, and not with fear, is that there has already been a time in the history of our world when there were great signs in the heavens, and it was that time when the baby Jesus was born. There was an extraordinary star seen in the sky, and it led the wise men to find and worship the one who was foretold to be the savior of the world. The shepherds were frightened by the appearance of God’s angels in the sky, telling them of the wonderful news and praising God. Not knowing what it all meant for them and for all mankind, they were frightened – just as you and I would have been.

² *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. Nashville : Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989, S. 1 Th 3:12

³ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. Nashville : Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989, S. Lk 21:28

But please note that, scared as they were, they didn't sit around out in the fields. They gathered up their courage and followed the star.

Soon we will celebrate the birth of the child to whom the star pointed, and we need to see the nativity for what it was, the fulfillment of God's promises to his people. Without the intervention of God in our lives, we would indeed have every reason to fear final judgment, for no one in this church, or in any other church or synagogue, or on the street deserves eternal life in heaven on his or her own merits. It is only through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross that our bondage to sin is released, that we are set free to be the people God has always intended us to be.

There is a tendency, I think, to forget the cross at Christmas. We save it for Easter. But you cannot separate the death of Jesus on the cross from his birth in a manger in Bethlehem. Even the gifts of the wise men reflect this, for the myrrh, that was one of the three gifts, was used in anointing the dead. Myrrh represents mortality, suffering, and sorrow. The Israelites used perfumed ointments of myrrh in their funeral preparations. From St. John's Gospel when the lifeless body of Jesus has been removed from the cross: "³⁹Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. ⁴⁰They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews."⁴

So the gift of one of the wise men appears at both the birth and death of Jesus. You cannot separate one from the other.

As we make our way through Advent this year, I can promise you that we will be distracted by all of the secular world's pressures on us. We will be focused on what

⁴ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. Nashville : Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989, S. Jn 19:39

gifts to give to whom, which cards to send to whom, and everywhere we go there will be Christmas music. But Advent is like its companion season of Lent, a time of preparation.

So just as we will be called to the observance of a Holy Lent, so we are now called to the observance of a Holy Advent. Even if it is only for the short time that we are together in this building, worshipping with one another, let us put aside the distractions of the world and, as today's collect invites us, "put on the armor of light."

Rejoice, my friends, and give thanks, for by God's grace and through the love of his son Jesus, we receive the greatest gift of all. We are called to the Kingdom of Heaven, where for all eternity we will do that for which we were created. We will worship God, as light perpetual shines upon us.

Because of all the worldly distractions, it is not an easy task to use the time of Advent to turn again to God, to confess and put away all that we have done which is not pleasing in his sight. But despite the difficulty, this is a time when we can once more show one another, and all whom we encounter, that we are people who need not stand in fear of anything, for we are the people of God. Take that message to your friends and your families. Invite them to join with you in seeing this birthday of the Christ child as a new beginning.

And as St. Paul says, "... may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all."⁵

Amen.

⁵ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. Nashville : Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989, S. 1 Th 3:12