

Sermon

Advent 1C 2024 December 1, 2024

Luke 21:25-36

As I said during the opening announcements, “Happy New Year!” Today is the First Sunday of Advent, the first day of the year on the liturgical calendar, and the first day of Year C.

Being the first day of the New Year, you would think we would begin at the beginning with our gospel reading. After all, on New Year’s Day of that other calendar we have a tradition of beginning again or of making fresh starts. We look ahead and make a resolution or two that this year will be different. This year we will begin exercising more, reading more, volunteering more, eating healthier, or whatever the case may be that we think will allow us to start fresh.

But on the first day of the Christian new year, we begin at the end, not at the beginning. Why? Why, when we think about new years and new beginnings, do we begin at the end?

Today’s gospel passage comes near the end of the Luke during Holy Week. Once again we hear Jesus preparing his disciples for both his earthly departure and the end times. While it may not sound like it on the surface, Jesus is giving his disciples a sense of hope in these last days.

A casual reading of this passage might cause some concern or distress. Signs in the sun, moon, and stars, roaring of seas, and distress among nations confused by it all doesn’t sound pleasant.

But look ahead to Revelation 21: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. And I saw the holy city coming down out of heaven prepared as a bride.”

And look back to Genesis 1: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep. Then God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.”

In both looking forward and in looking back, what we see is a new creation. And in both those times of creation, chaos was present. What we are seeing and hearing is

not simply a vision of chaos and destruction, but a vision of a new creation. Anytime there is a new creation, there is chaos; the trick is to not get swept away or distressed by the chaos, but to understand that God is doing a new thing and it will be okay – eventually. It will be messy and chaotic during that transition, but eventually God’s new creation will come and it will be okay.

“Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and know your redemption is drawing near.” Another way of saying this is that your deliverance, or the time of your rescuing, is drawing near. To make his point, Jesus tells the parable of the trees. “As soon as they sprout leaves you know that the summer is near. So also when you see these things, you know the kingdom of God is near.”

Again, a casual reading of this passage might lead some to conclude that Jesus is speaking only of the redemption of a few. But that would negate the universality of Christ. Like the sprouting of leaves mark the beginning of summer for all people, these times and signs mark the beginning of God’s reign for all people.

This redemption Jesus speaks of is a period of transformation, healing, and wholeness for all of creation, and not for just a select few. We are not being given a private lifeboat that only has room for a few – we are being given a vision and a promise of new life for all.

While Jesus is telling them all this, the disciples are probably wondering, “When will this be?” In answer to their unasked question, Jesus says, “This generation will not pass away until all things have taken place.”

The word “generation” can mean a generation like we normally think of it – grandparents to parents to children/grandchildren. It can also mean a group of people born during a specific time period – Baby Boomers, Gen X, Gen Y, Millennials. It could also mean the complete age of human history. The fact of the matter is that we don’t know exactly what Luke meant when he wrote this, other than to say that at some point things will cease to exist as we know it and God’s final reign will begin.

One quick note about this generation not passing away until all things have taken place. This is less about a specific time period and more about knowing the “rapture” is a figment of some people’s imagination. There is nothing in Scripture or in Jesus’ words that indicates believers will be miraculously and magically whisked

away to bliss in order to avoid difficult times. When you see these difficult times, stand up and raise your heads because we will be witnesses in the face of suffering and death. It won't be our disappearance in times of suffering that testifies to the presence of God, it will be our presence with others in times of suffering that will offer hope to those needing it.

On this First Sunday of Advent at the beginning of the year, we begin at the end. Why is that?

It's because Advent is the season of preparation. We are preparing for the coming of Christ, in both what was and what is yet to be. With both Christmas and Jesus' return, we prepare ourselves. We prepare ourselves for Christmas with decorations, plans, gifts, meals, and the like. We prepare ourselves for God's reign by understanding that the new creation will be preceded by a time of chaos and transition, but living as if the reign of God were already accomplished.

It's because, as with any journey, it helps to know where we're going. So instead of starting the New Year off with a resolution about exercise, or diet, or any other general self-improvement resolutions, maybe we should begin at the end. I want to get to my ideal weight. I want to reduce my cholesterol. I want to be **THERE**, so I will begin preparing in **THIS** way.

Advent begins with the end because knowing the end result can help us weather the storms of chaos and transition. It can help us widen our view of how we get there. And it can help us stay focused in times of uncertainty.

Advent begins with the end because that just might be the best way to prepare.

Amen.