

Advent I (C) RCL
November 29, 2009

St. Margaret's
Annapolis

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. *Amen.*

Happy New Year! No, I'm not a month early – at least not as far as the church calendar is concerned. You'll notice that our hangings and vestments are different today; they're blue, and will be blue for the four Sundays of Advent. The Advent wreath is hanging above, with its one lighted candle today. And we'll omit the Alleluias for this penitential season. Yes, it's Advent, and that is the new church year.

For the past few weeks, Bill has been going through slides and pictures, and I've been going old files, one of which is a folder stuffed full of cartoons that I've saved over the years. You've already heard a couple of them, and here's another one:

"Lucy," says Charlie Brown, "do you think the world will come to an end in our time?" Lucy says, "I try not to think about such things." "Well," says Charlie Brown, "now that I've brought it to your attention, what do you think?" And Lucy replies, "When things that I try not to think about are brought to my attention, I try not to think about them."

Every year it's the same. No matter what year of the lectionary cycle we're in, the First Sunday in Advent is always full of dire, apocalyptic warnings: *signs in the sun and the moon... distress among nations... the powers of the heavens will be shaken...* All of which sounds terribly familiar if you're into either the movies or the news these days.

There are several blockbuster movies just out, all of which are about the destruction of the world from one cause or another. Meanwhile, according to the National Geographic magazine, scientists are seriously searching for other planets that can support life as we know it. And as for "distress among nations," well, that's too obvious for words.

Reality is enough! Why is it that this is the theme of Advent year after year? After all, everyone else is putting up their Christmas decorations and getting into the spirit of the holidays. And I bet a lot of people – like I did as a child – go to Christmas Day on the calendar and count backwards to figure out when the Twelve Days of Christmas start. (Not the way the Twelve Days of

Christmas works, by the way.) But while children are counting the days and making their lists for Santa, we're hearing about the apocalypse. Go figure!

Nobody knows exactly how this business of Advent got started, but it is a very ancient custom. The earliest reference is from around the 5th century, when it was decreed that there should be a fast three times a week from the feast of St. Martin (on November 11th) until Christmas. In 567, the Second Vatican Council of Tours instructed monks to fast from the beginning of December until Christmas Day. The penance was soon extended to the laity, and spread across Europe.

Literally, the word Advent means "coming." Theologically, it refers to the coming of Christ. That coming has three stages [which we will recall in a few minutes during the Eucharistic prayer]: Christ in the past, Christ in the present, and Christ in the future.

The first two are fairly easy to understand. Jesus was born into the world; an event that is tied to history. That's the past. And this is the part that we associate with Christmas – celebrating the Christ Child who came among us on that Christmas Eve.

The second is about the presence of Christ in our daily lives; the Christ who, with the Holy Spirit, transforms us, comforts us, and is part and parcel of our present days. It's the future part that gets us; the part about Christ's second coming.

That's because we hear Jesus' words as a threat, when a closer reading reveals something else: not threats, but words of warning from one who loves us. We are to *wait* and *be ready*.

The waiting part is not only about waiting for the remembered birth of the Christ Child. It is also about waiting for Christ to return... about waiting for a promise to be fulfilled. That promise – that Christ would return in glory to fulfill the promise of salvation – was great news to Luke's struggling community of faith. But for us... for us in our time and place... we don't have much reason to want the end to come.

Preacher and pastor Cornelius Plantinga, Jr writes:

We live ... with a "ground-level Christianity" of worship and sacraments, of prayer and scripture, of the golden rule and of God's law. Week after week, we use some of our resources in support of the things of God in this world. Perhaps that is enough of a nod to faithfulness.

But, he says, in the midst of our comfortable lives, we don't really want to know too much about this new reign of God.

"We whisper our prayers for the kingdom so that God can't quite hear them. 'Thy kingdom come,' we pray, and hope it won't. 'Thy kingdom come,' we pray, 'but not right away.'"

For people whose lives were filled with bad news, the promise of Christ's return was – and is – good news. For those of us whose lives are pretty good as they are, you might say: it loses its immediate appeal. But even for us, this can be a message of hope.

Whatever else it is, Jesus' apocalyptic vision of the end is also a beautiful and poetic affirmation of the ultimate nature of reality – that heaven and earth are subservient to the powers of God. And God – who we call almighty, omniscient, all powerful – God is above all things... merciful.

That's the part of the message that is missing from those who proclaim and promote ideas of "rapture" – which, by the way, comes from the nineteenth century American revivalists, not from scripture. That's the part of the message that is missing from the "left behind" books and the earthquake movies... that above all things, God is merciful!

But all those popular messages are enough to make a person wonder what to believe. So I tell you this: if the message is laden with judgment and fills you with fear, *it is false*. If the message is one that pits people against each other, causes us to doubt, suggests that we isolate ourselves from others who are different from us, then I tell you, *it is false*.

The true message, the message buried in the deeper meaning of the apocalyptic passages and in the parables of waiting, is a consistent message of hope and redemption. **BE ALERT! GOD IS COMING! AND THIS IS GOOD NEWS!**

The kind of waiting that Luke had in mind is embodied, strangely enough, in a Texan A&M football tradition. If you've ever watched one of their games, you might have noticed that the entire Texas A&M student body stands throughout the whole game. If you inquired as to the origins of this unusual behavior, you would find out that it comes from a legend near and dear to the heart of every Texas Aggie.

As the legend goes, in a long ago game of critical importance, the Aggie team suffered injury after injury until only ten players remained to take the

field. In order to save the Aggies from a terrible defeat, a valiant member of the student body lept from the stands, ran onto the field, and subsequently dashed for a stunning touchdown... contributing to the Aggie victory. Ever since, so the story goes, the entire Texas A&M student body remains standing during the entire game – waiting, vigilant, ready to leap into action!ⁱⁱ

So... here we are in Advent. Here we are – again – facing the apocalyptic warnings of the First Sunday of Advent, to say nothing of the trials and tribulations of the pre-Christmas season.

Although I've given up much of my earlier struggle to resist the Christmas tide in favor of Advent, I think it's a good thing that the Church reminds us what it is we are waiting for... and how we are to wait. Be alert! Be ready! God is coming! And this is good news!

Amen.

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ⁱ From Lectionary Homiletics, Vol. XIV, No. 6, p.68

ⁱⁱ Ibid, p. 66