

First Sunday of Advent  
November 29, 2009

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*Scriptures: Jeremiah 33:14-16, Psalm 25, 1Thessalonians 3:9-13, Luke 21:25-36*

### **A New Beginning**

These are the days of new beginnings. It is after all the first Sunday of advent, which as you probably know, marks the start of a new ecclesiastical year. Therefore, happy new year to all of you.

Having done away with the turkey dinner, we go right into Christmas mode, the season in which we begin to do our new things. We begin our new shopping list, we begin to set up our new decorations, we begin to get our new wardrobe, and we even begin to put together our new list of resolutions for next year. There's no way to miss the signs of this time of the year. There are those heartfelt, time-honored traditions like the Macy's Thanksgiving parade, the football game on TV, and of course the family and friends' overnight camping at your favorite retail store parking lot on Black Friday.

What a contrast, my brothers and sisters, don't you think, what a contrast! I mean, everything around us points to the joy and hope of the new season that is about to begin. It's all preparation and anticipation. We can already taste the tastes, and smell the aromas associated with "the most wonderful time of the year" as Andy Williams' traditional song reminds us. So when we come to church on that first Sunday of Advent, the time of preparation for the celebration of the birth of baby Jesus, we do expect to be told about the hope and happy eagerness of the season to come. Even the colors and decorations at church are festive with the bright blue paraments symbolizing the cheerful anticipation of the season to come. And yet, here we are hearing about the signs of the time to come, which is not precisely the jolly-good-time of Christmas, but the signs of the end of time.

So Jesus says: "People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken." While we set up Nativity scenes with a sweet baby Jesus lying in a manger, the grown-up, just-about-to-die Jesus is standing in the Temple, teaching about the coming catastrophe. I don't know about you, but to me this reading seems to put those Christmas preparations in a different perspective. What a contrast indeed!

What do we do? Why are these the appointed readings for this time of the year? What are we supposed to be thinking of? Should we go ahead and continue the celebration with no worries? Here, at the beginning of the beautiful season of Advent, the intent of the church is not to spoil things with talk of the end of the world while the culture around us is set for weeks of parties, gift-giving, and family reunions. To be honest, these are (or can be) all good things; however, there's more going on here than just celebrating a festive season at the end of one year before we begin another. As we said, the season of Advent itself actually begins a new church year, even though it comes at the end of the secular calendar year. It's no wonder folks get a little confused between these beginnings and endings,

when the year begins with a reading that appears to be about the end of everything. I wonder, what's important about it? Why are we talking about the end, here at the start of the new season and the new church year?

Well, to begin with we can't enjoy beginnings and endings if we don't like change. By definition, if we are talking about the ending of a season and the beginning of a new one, we must also recognize that change will be a part of it. And change is usually problematic for many of us; we don't like it, we resist it. We tend to resist change because it makes our life unstable and unpredictable. We like it when things remain the same for a long time, because it makes us feel safe and in control. When change happens we no longer know what to expect and that gives us anxiety. But again, here we have Jesus talking about changes. And he is not talking about moving the furniture around; no he is describing the biggest change of all, the transformation of *everything* when "the Son of Man" rides in "on a cloud with power and great glory."

Theologian Dianne Bergant reminds us that there's a "distress that accompanies any major natural, social, or personal upheaval. At such times we may be shaken to our foundations; we are dismayed, frightened to death." We know that even good change brings a kind of stress and instability, and we humans prefer things to be calm, predictable, and comfortable.

There's a book by William Bridges (*Transitions*) that described the in-between time we experience in any major change in our lives. There is a point, or a period of time, that we spend in between one time or place, and another time and place. In that in-between time, we have to live with things being not so clear or comfortable. That seems to be what Advent living is about. "The Advent way of life," Bergant writes, "does not necessarily require unusual behavior on our part, but it calls us to live the usual unusually well. It affects the everyday events of life; it directs the way we interact with people; it informs the attitudes that color our judgments and motivations. It is as ordinary as the birth of a child; it is as extraordinary as the revelation of God."

"To live the usual unusually well." I like that line. In Leo Tolstoy's story, "Where Love Is, God Is," we hear about Martin. He is a cobbler who keeps waiting for a dramatic revelation of God. His prayer for God's ultimate expression of power is answered by the everyday sightings of God as love in action, in charity, justice, and compassion toward the people Martin meets each day. You see, it may take us a long time if we sit down to wait for the hand of God to break out from heaven, but if we are willing to see the hand of God showing up in our everyday life, we may have a better chance of witnessing his action in our midst. Jesus wants his hearers to do precisely that and so he tells them the parable about the fig tree. When you see the tree sprouting leaves, you know the summer is near. Well, so it is with the kingdom of God. It is just as simple. Perhaps the people at the time of Jesus, like we do, may have been focusing on abstract things, like judgment or salvation, or on dramatic things, like earthquakes and plagues. By directing their attention to a sprouting tree, Jesus let them know that they did not have to work so hard, that God was speaking to them in the most ordinary events of their lives. We need to wonder how are we using the time we have while we're waiting for Jesus to return.

Yes, we have to be alert, but not so that you will know when to grab your crash helmet and head for the basement as when a tornado comes. No, we are alert so that we will know when the kingdom is near so that we will not miss God when God comes. I wonder how that might actually happen, you know, the day of Jesus' return. We are people of faith and yet I imagined it will cause a lot of people to be scared and anxious. But that's not what Jesus is saying that we should be doing. It is much more simple. Instead of all the apprehension and fear Jesus invites us to simply pray. "Pray [to God] so that you may be strong enough".

It seems that our media feeds our ambivalence on this end-times question. Actually, you would think that we enjoy it. Have you been to the movies lately? Have you seen the "2012" movie? It is based on the supposed prediction by the Mayan calendar that the world is going to end on December 21, 2012. Ever since the movie was announced, people have been going crazy talking about the things that will supposedly happen. Everybody is scared and anxious about it. Isn't it funny? It's a movie based on the current anxiety over predictions of the world's end in 2012. People are scared to death, but they are willing to pay money to see "the end of time." I haven't seen it, but I confess that I probably will. I love a good scare. But then, it's not only the media. There have always been plenty of preachers and proselytizers who have spread the message of impending doom. Wouldn't it make more sense that they might consider preaching a gospel about how much God loves us and forgives us and offers us a new life of grace? Maybe those door-to-door-end-of-the-world-foretellers would find more people willing to listen to them.

During Advent, we're looking forward, just as our Jewish ancestors in faith looked forward, to the fulfillment of God's promises of peace. Christians see in Jesus the gift of peace, and we sing carols about that peace, and yet we look around and see that the world is not at peace. Justice does not reign, and the earth groans in pain, and nations continue to settle their disputes by killing each other. These things have happened for the better part of human history and many have been constant in trying to associate that with end-of-the-world predictions supposedly found in the Bible.

Well, the Bible does talk indeed about times when the faithful are persecuted and about great suffering occurring, but not because it is intended to be used as a prediction of the future. These apocalyptic passages are an invitation to believers to remain faithful in the midst of their trials knowing that God will also remain faithful to his promises. If we are to listen to what the Bible says about the future, let us not do so as if it was a fortune teller, but as what it is: an announcement about the unfailing love and compassion of God. "When these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your hands, because your redemption is drawing near". "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away". That is the promise and future that God has for us.

So, in the midst of all that, what is the promise and future that God has for us at Emanuel Lutheran Church? What can we find in the readings for today that may give us a glimpse of the times to come? Again, we can't use the Bible as a fortune teller machine to find out what's going to happen in our future. That's not the purpose of the Word of God. The truth of the matter is that we can't just figure out the future in such a way. What we can do is take a look at the past and see what has happened before.

Now, I may not be the most appropriate person to tell the history of this congregation, but I can make a fairly well informed guess based on the stories I have already heard. I've heard of difficult times when many brothers and sisters didn't know how things would move forward. I've heard of bitter disputes that have made some wonder if they could remain in this place. There have been disagreements about how to do ministry and there have even been disagreements about who to minister to. People, important people to the life of this congregation have left for a variety of reasons. Lay leaders, community leaders, council presidents, pastors. The surrounding community has changed several times, each change becoming a challenge to the survival of the church. Oh yes, there have been plenty of challenges and threats and yet here we are. Maybe we are still here because many other things have also been happening. It's not only about the difficulties and problems faced throughout the years. There have also been plenty of opportunities and challenges met. Maybe this congregation is still here because during those times when it was difficult to figure out what to do next, they got together to find out a way to continue the work being done. Maybe we are still here because when disputes broke out, they were able to humbly forgive and ask for forgiveness. Maybe we are still here because at those times when they didn't know how to do ministry, they simply kept preaching the Word and distributing the Sacraments. I'm sure that we are still here because when they didn't know who to minister to, they simply looked around and recognized that their neighbor was the needy, and the hungry, and the homeless who just happened to be in the community. I know that this community of faith is still here because when it came the time for the people that you love to leave, you realized that God was still very much present here.

You see, it is not your ministry or my ministry in the sense that it depends on you or me or anyone else for that matter. It continues to be God's creative power; it continues to be the leading of the Holy Spirit; it continues to be Jesus' redemptive grace. Those are things that continue to sustain the church. It's not about who's leading or who is doing what, or about how long we've been doing it, or any of that. It is about what God wants to do, what God wants this community to be, what God is set on doing in our midst.

I think, from the little I have come to learn about this congregation, that the thing that has sustain it through the years is that you've been able to recognize the face of God on those around you. Yes, certainly on the faces of those sitting by your side, but also equally, maybe even more important, you have recognized the face of God on the faces of those outside of our walls. You see, brothers and sisters, we have heard far too many stories about congregations closing their doors when their surrounding communities change. I'm not saying that they have been ill intentioned, but maybe they just didn't know how to manage it, how to face change. Maybe they were so worried about saving their church that they forgot that Jesus had already saved it in the cross. In contrast, this congregation has tried as best as you've been able to, to remain faithful to the ministry of the community where you are.

I have the sense that there is a true spirit of service here, service done in the name of God, for the children of God whoever they may be. When that happens, when we are able to see God in others regardless of the color of their skin, or their sexual orientation, or the

language they speak, or the way they worship, or where they come from; when we see that it is God whom we are encountering, we have a good chance of doing the right thing.

Change is happening. It is a constant. It is part of life. We actually transition through life in many different respects. You know, we grow up, we go to school, we get a job, we get married, we have children, we retire, and finally we change our physical lives for an eternal life with God. We can do nothing else but change. Certainly change can be very challenging, but change can also be an opportunity. Just like this congregation which has seen a changing neighborhood as an opportunity to serve God in a different way. Here at the start of the Advent season we have a new opportunity to embrace change and yet continue to be the same faithful community that God is calling us to be. I don't know where the road is leading us, but I do know that God will be with us. We can't worry about the future at the expense of the present. The present, changed or not is all we got, we can only try to remain faithful to God. God will certainly remain faithful to us. It is a new beginning and one that we have the faith and the hope that God will lead us through. May it be God who always lead our life. Amen.