

*Psalm 25: 1-10*

*Luke 21: 25-36*

Thanksgiving is over, the consumerist flurry of Black Friday has settled, some of you are finally willing to break out the Christmas music, and you arrive here, at the First Sunday of Advent, the dawn of our season of hopeful waiting, to hear this strange and frankly...quite frightening text. The Christmas bells are not yet ringing, not until we make it through this delightful twist that happens every year on the first Sunday of Advent, when our lectionary texts ask us to journey through one of the “little apocalypses” found in the gospels to kick off the Advent season. As an apocalyptic text, this passage invites us to peel back layers of comfort in a process of unveiling, coming to witness what God is doing in the world. But it’s unsettling. This passage is not an eager, here-comes-joyous-Christmas sort of passage...it’s dark and haunting. It’s frightening. I’m not sure I am ready or eager to live in the world it describes, at least at a first reading, a world where “people will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming into the world.” Advent is a season of preparation and eager anticipation, but this passage might give us pause. The kingdom of God is close at hand...but it’s not all golden streets and beautiful angels.

I always find it interesting to think about the mixed-up patterns of time that we engage through the liturgical year. The word Advent comes from the Latin word for “arrival” and “appearance.” It’s about the dawn of something new, and in our tradition, we let this season be an invitation into things yet to come. Even though we know Christ is already here among us, every year we engage this four-week-long ritual of waiting, hoping, and wondering. What will the fresh coming of Christ bring us? Are our eyes open? Are we ready to receive?

To a newcomer, the ritual of Advent might all seem a little ridiculous. Isn’t our whole faith rooted around the idea that the Son of God *has* appeared? That we no longer have to wait? That we are in the presence of God, surrounded by the Holy Spirit? That the Kingdom of God is already among us, as Jesus tells the Pharisees just four chapters before our passage for this morning. As we gather around the words of “O Come O Come Emmanuel,” mourning our exile until Christ appears, the structure of symbolic time can be confusing, and yet I often find this mixed-up sense of time to be one of the most fascinating and compelling mysteries of our collective faith. We may not live to see certain futures realized on earth, and yet we have hope that God is present across time and space and that our work here and now matters as a result. We may not have been present 2000 years ago as Jesus lived and taught among the people, but we are confident that Christ is with us even now, calling us to action and guiding us in our lives.

There is profound hope in God's time being less linear than our calendars, clocks, and schedules lead us to believe. We trust that Christ is already here, but also that Christ is still actively coming into the world. It allows us to invest in our ideals rather than limit ourselves by a scarcity mindset to just get through today. I have a friend from seminary who speaks eloquently around every election about how her faith leads her to vote for what she believes in, even if a candidate or position might not seem to be the most "practical" or safe choice—the hope of Christ guides her convictions and helps her trust that advocating for what she believes in is worthwhile, even if it is inefficient or takes years to get right. God's time can inspire us to risks for the sake of love.

But simultaneously, stepping outside of time can be terrifying. Our passage for the day invites us to look around and witness the signs "of what is coming upon the world." It's ill-defined and our imaginations can run amok. In the last few years, I know I have at times been overwhelmed by looking at terrible things happening in the world and wondering "will this ever be okay again?" Will climate change slow? Will the pandemic come to an end? Will justice be served when yet another unarmed Black or Brown sibling is violently killed in our country? How many more times will we wait with bated breath around news of guilt or acquittal for a publicly witnessed crime? These are the signs of the times that surround and intimidate us, and *if we let them*, they will lead to despair. Why should we hope? Why should we work for a better future? Why should we try when it all feels so futile?

When that fear threatens to overcome us, Christ meets us with a still, small voice, beckoning us into a new way of thinking about time. "Heaven and earth may pass away, but God's words will not pass away." Hope glimmers as we look to Christ coming into the world, and our waiting is full of urgent anticipation and preparation. We do not sit passively by, but work with God to prepare a better way forward even as we struggle with the ongoing reality of injustice and suffering. This passage, and the gospel of Luke as a whole, was likely written down sometime around 85 CE, when its writer and audience would have already seen the siege of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple, and a hard beginning for followers of Christ. Writing down Jesus's story, they also had to make sense of terrible and unsettling things happening in their world at the moment. Christ had come, but all was not yet well in the world. Time was mixed-up. Hope may have been hard to find, or confusing to make sense of. Still, through it all, God was present, God is present, and God will be present. Christ is coming into the world and we wait with eager and urgent anticipation, looking for the Advent signs around us, even while Christ is already among us.

When we feel climate despair, or see something bafflingly unjust in the news cycle, or have another family gathering canceled by a new COVID outbreak, it is easy for the fear and pain of the moment to eclipse our hope in things to come. Our cultural understanding of what apocalypse is, informed by zombie movies and images of violent destruction can make us want to turn away from this little apocalypse, but perhaps it is most in these moments of fear that God calls us to lean in and witness the steadfast presence of God. Even when all is not-yet-right in the world, God has been, God is, and God will be. God doesn't ask us to close our eyes to the world around us and pretend everything is joyous. We can look around at frightening signs, and as predictably as the fig tree will blossom in summer, God will show up and join us in co-creation of the world that is yet to come. We wait for advent hope, not passively, but with urgency, knowing that we have a particular role in creating a better world, and fear does not have to rule the day.

The Reverend Hannah Lundberg

One of my favorite Instagram pages to follow is one called “Black Liturgies,” which is run by Cole Arthur Riley, a Black woman and theologian who creates hundreds of these succinct, focused prayers that speak to questions of justice and love in the world from a Black theological perspective. Last week she had a post about fear, and it resonated with me as I was thinking about how fear can keep us stuck in place. In particular, she offered a breath prayer, which is a simple, two-line prayer that you can say to yourself while taking a deep breath in and a deep breath out. Can we try Cole’s prayer about fear in this moment?

Breathe in: I will not be silenced by fear.

Breathe out: My trembling voice is still holy.

*(Repeat until you feel grounded)*

I don’t know about you, but that is a prayer I need to hear, speak, and know in my bones far more often than I’d like to admit it. When I see the signs of the world around me—spiking COVID cases, injustice in our national legal system, climate change I feel helpless to stop, fear, loss, brokenness...I will not be silenced by fear...My trembling voice is still holy.

What could we become if we refused to be silenced by fear? If we could boldly witness the signs of change in our world but remain rooted in the knowledge that God’s sense of time extends beyond what we can see and invites us to play an active role in hopeful anticipation. Our first reading for today was Psalm 25, and I find there some particular hope in God’s presence beyond the constructs of linear time. Something to root us in God’s steadfastness rather than fear of the world. If you return to it, you’ll notice is full of language about time’s winding and circuitous path. I think it invites us in its own way to experience the convoluted but hopeful nature of stepping outside of time and knowing that God values us fully beyond the particular fearful moments we might have trouble seeing past.

Verse 7 of this Psalm goes: “Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember *me*, for your goodness’ sake, O LORD!”—This plea echoes in my mind on many occasions. It invokes God to understand the speaker outside of time and circumstance, outside of the mistakes they may have made when they were younger, or when they were tired or when they were fed up with all the waiting that this life brings. Across all time and space, remember *me* the speaker cries. Value me. Know me. Witness the fullness of my humanity beyond any snapshot of my life at my best or at my worst—remember it all. As many of the Psalms function, it seems that even in this cry, the speaker knows that God has *already*

remembered them. Outside of time and space, even before we cry out, God has already remembered us, with mercy and steadfast love that extends from generation to generation. And yet, we are invited to cry out to God in this way when we need to. Beyond the constraints of linear time, when we feel overwhelmed by frightening signs in the world around us, we can wrestle with God, praise God, and plead with God and it *matters*. We look around, we witness the signs of the broken world we live in, and God beckons to us through it all: watch and see, keep awake, I am still doing a new thing. Friends, come into this Advent season, and wait, but wait with urgency and bravery...we are yet being called into the work God has for us. There lies hope beyond anything we can imagine.