

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
November 29, 2009  
First Sunday of Advent  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Zechariah 14:4-9  
Psalm 50:1-6  
I Thessalonians 3:9-13  
Luke 21:25-31

We find ourselves today at an exciting time and place in our spiritual journey. The lengthy season of Kingdometide has yielded to Advent, and we begin the church year anew by responding to the challenge to prepare for the Lord's coming.

Indeed, the past, present, and future all call on us to prepare for Christ's coming. We recall Christ coming to us as a baby born in Bethlehem (the past). We are conscious that he comes to us now in the present through the Word and Sacraments. And we are told that he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and to bring God's kingdom of peace in its complete fullness.

Most of us have little trouble preparing to celebrate Christ's birth and enjoying the traditions that go with that. And most of us can see and experience Christ's presence among us in the present through the sacraments. But focusing on the *end* of time as we know it can be a difficult task, especially when we are confronted by the apocalyptic images such as we're given in our Scripture lessons today.

I will come back to those images in a moment, but the reason it may be easy for us to lose sight of the grand biblical truth that Jesus will return in power and glory is that so much time has elapsed between the promise and its fulfillment. The passage of so much time makes our constant vigilance more difficult and can take the “edge” off of our highly charged anticipation.

Jesus said he would return. But the readers of Luke’s Gospel had been waiting with baited breath for more than 50 years, and he still had not come.

If we bring this forward to our time, we can say that approximately 32,000 days have elapsed since Jesus said he would return. And the increasing passage of time between a promise and its fulfillment does two things: it increases the arrogance of the skeptic, and it tests the spiritual “mettle” of the faithful.

And if believers are not careful, the passage of time and the attitudes of skeptics can subtly influence us to the point where we don’t wholeheartedly believe that Jesus *will* return again, and if we *do* believe it we don’t always live like it. We pray “thy kingdom come,” more in a low whisper than in a firm voice of conviction.

But hear me well this morning. On an authority not my own I confidently tell you that the day is coming when time as we know it will end, when Jesus Christ will come again to put all enemies under his feet and to bring the kingdom of God in its fullness.

The day is coming when we will be held accountable for how we have *lived* and how we have *loved*, for the investment we have made of our lives during the short time we have lived on this earth, for the priorities and prerogatives we have valued.

To all of those -- believers and unbelievers alike -- who are tempted to think that the increasing passage of time means the decreasing ability to believe the promise, I say to you this morning: “Wake up!” The King of Kings is coming again, and you would do well to spend your whole life preparing for that meeting.

Now, if my homiletical urgency doesn’t wake you from your lethargy, perhaps the apocalyptic images of our texts will do the job.

One of the functions of apocalyptic images such as we have today is that they shock us out of our complacency and remind us of the reality of Christ’s return.

But in doing so, they can often create great fear as well. I remember reading some of these texts as a new Christian and being frightened to death! Images of the earth melting with fervent heat, the moon turning to blood, the heavens and earth undergoing convulsions and seizures, literally scared the “hell” out of me.

And you can read these apocalyptic passages and be frightened and tempted to ask, “what is the world coming to?”

But I have come to believe that is not the primary question that apocalyptic texts seek to address. The primary question behind these texts is not, “what’s the world coming to?” But rather, “Who is coming to the world?”

And we know the answer to that.

And because we know the answer to that, I have become convinced that the apocalyptic writings of scripture are not meant to frighten us but to make us hopeful and to help us wait expectantly for Christ’s return. If the passage of time takes some of the “edge” off of our eager anticipation of Christ’s return, these apocalyptic texts recover some of that “edge,” by jolting us from spiritual slumber and complacency.

I believe our lessons today do just that. Notice Christ’s words in the Gospel. He says, in verse 28, “when you see these things happening, stand straight up and look up, for your salvation is near!”

This is not the image of Christians cowering in the corner in fear. This is the image of believers rising to their feet in anticipation of something awesome that is about to happen.

And notice Paul’s words to the Thessalonians: “Christ will make your hearts strong, blameless, and holy when you stand before God our Father on that day when our Lord Jesus comes with all those who belong to him.”

This is not a picture of Christians cowering in fear. This is a picture of persons who are confident in their transformation and expectant in their hope.

These apocalyptic images in Scripture, then, should not frighten us to death, but should reenergize us spiritually. They should function to blow the cobwebs out of our spiritual lives and keep us diligently prepared for what awaits us. They should motivate us to wait actively, not passively, for Christ's return.

I discovered an example this week of how our Advent waiting should be an *active* waiting and not a *passive* waiting.

Deep in the heart of Texas lies Texas A & M University, where football is taken very seriously (as it is in all of Texas!). If you ever watch a Texas A & M game, you will notice something a little strange. In the section of seats reserved for the student body, you will notice that the entire student body remains standing for the entire game.

An apocryphal legend explains this. As the legend goes, several years ago during a hard-fought game, a rash of injuries decimated the Aggie team, leaving only 10 players on the field instead of 12. To keep the Aggies from a devastating defeat, one of the members of the student body leaped from the stands and ran onto the field, where he ran for a touchdown and helped his team win a stunning victory.

From that day on, according to the legend, the entire Texas A & M student body remains standing for the entire duration of every football game -- waiting, vigilant, in readiness to dash from the stands and leap into action on the field.

Brothers and sisters, this is the kind of vigilant waiting to which Advent calls us. We must be ready and alert, for the sum total of time and space as we know it is ripe for transformation that is beyond our human calculation.

As we come to the Table this morning, let us come asking for God's grace, that we might be open to the transformation God wants to work in our hearts in this Advent season, and to the transformation of the world that is yet to come.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.