

November 29, 2009  
First Sunday of Advent  
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They don't tell you that this is kind of an intimidating pulpit... (laughter)... I was not warned... Typically on Sunday mornings here at Trinity, you'll find me downstairs, in the basement, with Dagne Trommald and Regan Schutz, And somewhere in between twelve and twenty four- and five-year olds, and we're engaging in a way of doing religious education that's called "Godly Play." And I feel a bit lonely up here this morning, knowing that downstairs--probably as I speak--Regan is gathered in a circle with our Godly Play class. And she's telling them the story of Advent...about how Advent is a time that the church has set aside, to help us to get ready, to come close, to the mystery of Christmas. She's reminding the kids that sometimes mysteries are hard to enter. Sometimes people can walk right through a mystery, and not even know that it's there.

Every year people walk right through Christmas, and they miss the mystery. They don't know how to get ready for it. Maybe they forgot. So the church learned, a long time ago, that people need a way to get ready, to come close, to the mystery of Christmas. And so the church gives us time, which is a pretty great gift. Time...four weeks...four Sundays, to help us to get ready to enter that mystery. And then Regan will take the Holy Family figurines down from the shelf...the beautifully carved wooden Mother Mary and the Father Joseph, and the donkey, and she'll talk about light...the light of the Prophets...the light that guided Mary and Joseph on their way to Bethlehem. And that is the story, I daresay, that is the story that many of us come to church on the first Sunday of Advent, ready to hear. Longing to hear, even...we're surrounded on all sides...we're inundated...by the cultural behemoth that Christmas has become in America. And not all of that is bad. But not all of that is very helpful, in terms of getting ready to come close to the mystery of Christmas.

So we come to church--many of us--hoping to hear about a girl named Mary, and a man named Joseph, and an angel coming to bring them a message of peace, and hope...and instead...we get slammed, we get broadsided, we get hit over the head with the Apocalypse. Visions of destruction and violence, and panic and fear...distress among the nations...people fainting from fear and foreboding...Merry Christmas, right? Welcome to the holiday season, as the church has determined it will be begun. Every year this happens. Catherine asked me in the sacristy this morning, "Are we getting doom and gloom this morning?" I said "Yes, indeed--here it is--First Sunday of Advent." The first Sunday of the new liturgical year--our New Year in the church, our first Sunday of the year, the beginning joins up with the very ending, right?...the end of all things,...the breaking in, of the Kingdom of God, in the culmination of history on that last day.

The coming of that day--the day of the Lord...the Second Coming of Christ...that was a live expectation for the earliest Christians. They were looking...eagerly...for this dramatic, violent, political and spiritual end of history...the beginning of Jesus' reign...the overthrow of the Roman Empire, right? All of that...they were looking for that to happen, within their lifetimes. And there's this idea, among Episcopalian preachers, that we

don't live in that kind of expectation...that kind of context anymore. And I suppose they're right...the Messianic expectations of the first century, do not line up exactly with where most of us are in the twenty-first century. I mean, here we are, in a pretty comfortable and established Episcopal cathedral, in the middle of one of the least-churched areas in the country. And yet, I suspect, that we are more in tune with this ancient sensibility...this Apocalyptic mindset...the Apocalyptic imagination, if you will. I suspect that we're more in tune with that, than maybe we realize. And I wonder if that preoccupation...looking for the end of time...scanning the stars for signs of a coming Apocalypse. I wonder if we're not closer to the feelings that prompt that kind of preoccupation...the anxiety, the fear, the feelings of helplessness. I wonder if we're not closer to that, than we think.

And the easy and obvious place to go here is 2012, right...or Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (transcriber's note: *The Road* is a current movie about a post-apocalyptic world)--if you prefer your apocalyptic movies with a script as opposed to pyrotechnics. So there are all of these movies that are tapping in, to this cultural anxiety now, and I think we can set the Mayan long calendar aside this morning, and simply note--with interest--that there is a zeitgeist right now. There's a sense of anxiety about our future, that these movies and these books are tapping into. I'm not just talking about apocalypse movies. And I'm not just talking about the *Left Behind* series either (transcriber's note: *Left Behind* is a 16-novel apocalyptic fiction series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins) ...the way that those books and movies have helped to shape and focus some of evangelical Christianity's thinking, about the end of the world, and the second Coming of Christ--for good or ill. And, I'm not just talking about the way that this imagery..the roaring of the sea, and the waves' signs in the sun and the moon and the stars...people fainting from fear and foreboding. I'm not just talking about the way that those images of the Apocalypse get picked up in environmental literature, right?...in discussions about climate change, and global warming, peak oil, and the very real sense that the physical environment is on verge of collapse and destruction...and that our way of life is responsible for that.

I remember pretty clearly when the idea of the end of the world--the Second Coming--became a reality for me. I grew up in the world of American Evangelical Christianity..that part of the Christian family that tends to get its apocalyptic fix more from *Left Behind*, and less from...say, Al Gore's *Inconvenient Truth*? And I think it was a church membership class in 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> grade--we had these charts laid out in front of us...different beliefs that other evangelicals had about when Jesus' Second Coming would take place. And so, we were getting all these terms thrown at us..."post-tribulational premillennialism"... or "pre-tribulational dispensational premillennialism," or "post-millennialism," or "amillennialism" -- all talking about the Rapture and the Tribulation and the Last Judgement in these concrete terms. And I remember going home, and asking my Dad about all of this...what do we believe about all these prophecies of death and destruction and gloom and Jesus' Second Coming, and the Last Judgement, and all of that. It was all pretty *Left Behind*. So evangelicals were pretty much getting their eschatology from their pastors, or from people like Hal Lindsey. (Transcriber's note: Hal Lindsey 1929- an American evangelical writer/news analyst of current events, from a perspective of Bible prophecy.) And my Dad explained to me--as best

you can to a third grader--how these different theories and ideas play out, how the end of the world and Jesus' Second Coming might happen. And it was a significant moment for me...for two reasons. One, because it was the first time that the Apocalypse, the Second Coming became incredibly real to me. Like as an event that I was convinced was going to happen any day. Right within the year...within my lifetime. I remember kneeling in front of my fishtank, in my bedroom--that's where I prayed as a third-grader-- I don't really know why. I was in a play that summer. It was a play that I was really excited about...I had a great part, and I couldn't wait for the performances to start. And I remember kneeling, in front of my fishtank, and begging Jesus..."Please, could You just wait, and not come back to earth before opening night?" (laughter) "Because I really want to do this play."

And it didn't happen! The Second Coming did not happen for me that summer, and it did not happen for Jesus' earliest followers, either...who were living their lives in the expectation that it was right around the corner. Luke, in our reading this morning, has Jesus telling his disciples, "Truly, I tell you, this generation will not pass away, until all things have taken place." Luke's writing may be fifty or sixty years--a full generation--after Jesus' death. It didn't happen! And so you see the writer of Luke beginning to wrestle with this whole new problem--how are we to live, as people who expected the Apocalypse and the Second Coming...expected that they were imminent...but are beginning to see that the time is not here yet. When you think the Second Coming, is as close to you as say, 2012...it makes sense to hole yourself up in your basement with enough food to last you a few years. It makes sense to remove yourself, from human society, to put on your crash helmet, and wait it out.

But when it turns out that you were wrong...and life continues on in the same mundane way that it always has...then you've got a different theological problem. We still think that the End is coming...that final culmination of all things...the transformation of the world...the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God. But it sure is taking its sweet time to get here. And what are we supposed to do in the meantime? That's what I feel like the early Christians are asking themselves. What do we do while we're waiting? Or more basically: how do we wait? What does it mean that we are a people who are defined by our waiting?

Do you remember December 31, 1999? Y2K? And most of us know that the Y2K panic was an overhyped media frenzy. But there was the chance...that lingering doubt that maybe when those clocks changed over to 01/01/2000...that something nasty might hit the proverbial fan. I was a senior in high school that year. A bunch of us gathered at a friend's house, and we lit a fire in the fireplace. And it was mostly a joke...that the end of the world was upon us. But we lit the fire anyway--because we weren't sure that the lights were going to come on the next morning. And maybe we made a bit of extra chili--just in case. I remember driving my friend Anna home the next morning, when the end of the world did not happen, and it was one of those extremely wet, and tired, but gloriously sunny, January mornings in Oregon. I said, "Here it is...the first day of the end of the world." And she said, "Yeah, it's beautiful, isn't it?" (laughter) And it was! The world was beautiful! There was the sky, and the river and brown leaf sludge all over the road...and it was so normal, and so beautiful... The world did not end! The world had

not come crashing to a halt--we just picked up the next morning, and it was wet and cold--but beautiful!

Jesus' image for that waiting, is the fig tree. That's what we've got in our Gospel this morning. And there's a sympathy...a kind of traction there...waiting for the end of the world is not like hiding in a shack in the woods...writing crazy predictions on the back of tree bark. It's not like searching the newspapers every morning, for signs of the prophesies being fulfilled. It's not about parsing the skies, or the Scriptures, for clues. It's not about fitting every event in our lives, in the world around us, into some preconceived scheme, or prediction, or plan. Pre-millennialism, post-millennialism...I mean, forget about it. Waiting for the ending of the world...waiting for the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God...is like driving down a wet road, on the first day of the new year, and noticing again that the world has not changed! And yet, that the world is always being changed. And is incredibly beautiful. It's like watching a fig tree...about to bloom...as soon as the leaves sprout, Jesus says...you can see for yourself. You know that summer is already near. I think we serve a saviour who spent alot of time looking at trees...not waiting for them to burst into flames in front of him...not searching them for coded clues...not reading hidden significance into every leaf or bud or stem...just watching. And when it begins to bud, you know summer is coming.

Advent works that way. We do not begin the First Sunday of Advent, tracing the stars and the Scriptures for signs of the coming Apocalypse...coming day of doom. My job is not to stand up here, and point a finger at you, and say, "Keep watch! Lest that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap!" That's not the way Advent works for us. Downstairs our kids are getting it right. It's a time to get ready to come close...getting ready to come close to the mystery of Christmas...absolutely. But, maybe more deeply...a time to learn about what it means to get ready to come close to something that we don't understand. During Advent, we get ready to come close to the mystery of the Incarnation...the First Coming...God made human flesh. The splendor and power and glory of the divine, wrapped up in the mundane details of skin and bones, and straw, and swaddling cloths, and animal poop, and breast milk. That's what the First Coming looked like.

But more than that, what the First Sunday of Advent is designed to remind us of, is that we are getting ready to come close to the mystery of time. The mystery of the end of all time. The promise that we're not just wandering in circles...we're going somewhere...there's a trajectory there. And the mystery of how we're supposed to live, in the meantime, while we're still getting there, on the journey...which is actually not such a great mystery when it comes down to it...how to do that. We look. We look up. We look East. We look from afar, and lo, we see the power of God coming, and a cloud covering the whole earth, as we heard last night at Lessons and Carols. We look at the fig tree. We look at all the trees. And as soon as they sprout leaves, we know that Summer is already near. That's our Advent. That's our Coming...our orientation, in these days between...the days spent waiting...the days of expectation and longing and watching. That's what we do...we look. And we tell each other what we see.

When my Dad explained to me, the different ways that Christians talk about the end of time, it was significant to me for two reasons. One is that it made it very real to me. But the second reason that I remember it, is because of what he told me about how we wait. What he told me was that the Coming of the Kingdom of God...the Apocalypse...the end of the world...the end of time...whatever that was going to look like. It was not something of which I had to be afraid. And I wasn't. I went up to my room and prayed that it wouldn't come quite so soon, because I wanted to do a play...but I wasn't afraid. And weirdly, today...with terrifying visions of global climate change, and extreme devastation, and nuclear sanctions in Iran, and a poisoned water source on this side of the river, and an economy that really doesn't seem to be getting any healthier...even today, when the end of the world feels like it is right on our doorstep, I'm not afraid. That's the gift of Advent...the challenge of Advent. How do we learn how to look? And how do we learn how to not be afraid?

So, I'm waiting. And I invite you this Advent season to wait with me. And do not be afraid. Amen.