

We have spent most of the service today talking about decorations of the season and how they point us to God and the coming celebration of Jesus’ birth. Advent is a time to reflect on God’s gift of Jesus Christ, a time when we think about the light that has already come into the world in the form of a baby. The birth of the Messiah is, as the angels announced to the shepherds, good news of great joy.

But in our Christian tradition, Advent is also a time to think about Jesus’ return, coming in a cloud with power and glory. In today’s gospel lesson, Jesus talks about this second coming, when the world will be hit by cataclysmic events. We don’t quite know what to do with apocalyptic texts like this. Disruption in the sun, moon, and stars; roaring seas; confusion reigning in all the nations of the earth; people fainting from terror – to our ears, all this may sound like the plot of a science fiction movie. Indeed, it is the basis of the “Left Behind” series of books and movies.

We have a hard time wrapping our minds around a scenario like this, so we tend to ignore it. The signs Jesus talks about here were not new to the disciples Jesus was speaking to in this passage, because they knew Hebrew scripture. The Old Testament prophets, and even Psalms, contain prophecies similar to this.

Something that has always bothered me about this passage is the verse where Jesus says, “...this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place.” If we think of “generation” in the sense that we use the word, obviously that generation did pass away. I suddenly understood why Pastor Norman goes back to the original Greek so often to help us better understand scripture. So I got out my Strong’s Concordance and looked up the word that is translated here as “generation.” *Genea* (*ghen-eh-ah*) implies a period of time, an age, as in the Ice Age or the Industrial Age. It can also imply a group of people with a common bond, such as the followers of Jesus, who as a group have not passed away. So we don’t need to get hung up on the use of the word “generation.”

Furthermore, if we look at this same account in Matthew or Mark, right after Jesus talks about the fig tree budding, he says, “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” Only God knows when these things will come to pass.

We don’t talk much about the second coming in our church, although when we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, Pastor Norman uses a verse from 2 Corinthians: “For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.” Each week we pray together as Jesus taught us, “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done...” But I don’t recall sermons about the end of the world.

I wondered about this, so I went to the Presbyterian Church USA website – pcusa.org – to see what our denomination believes about this subject. On the “What We Believe” page, under “Theology” I found an article on “End of the World” from Presbyterians Today magazine, written by W. Eugene March, who is a Presbyterian minister, Theology Professor, and writer. It says the following:

“Presbyterians have clear teaching and strong conviction about the end of the world. These ... include such matters as the return of Jesus Christ, God’s final judgment, and the full reign of God. But fundamental to Presbyterian beliefs is a rejection of idle speculation about the “end times.” No one but God can know the time and way (Matthew 24:36). Therefore, certainty that God’s purposes will one day be brought to completion is sufficient for Presbyterians.”

In other words, it doesn’t matter when or how God’s Kingdom comes. This passage is not about the threat of the apocalypse, but about God’s promise to return with a kingdom of justice, righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. The point of this passage is that there will be a new beginning and Jesus Christ will be Lord of all. We would be wise to keep watch so that we are prepared for the coming of Jesus and not taken by surprise, but we can trust the details to God because we know our God is faithful and God’s promise of redemption will be fulfilled.

And what should we do in the meantime? We Presbyterians believe that God has given us important work to do until the Son of Man returns. Jesus, our ultimate teacher, has instructed us on how we should live as we watch and wait. Our number one job, the greatest commandment, is what? To love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.

Number two on the list is to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. In other words, we are to treat others as we would like to be treated. This may be challenging at times, but Jesus gave us a number of assignments to help us practice loving others, and in the process showing our love for God and giving the world a taste of God’s kingdom as well. For example, Jesus told us to:

Feed the hungry,
Clothe the naked,
Give a cup of cool water to the thirsty – and that when we do these things, it is as if we are doing them for Jesus himself.

Other assignments:

Heal the sick,
Care for the suffering,
Help the poor and the marginalized,
Seek justice for the oppressed,
Welcome strangers,
Extend mercy,

Love our enemies and pray for them,
Let the light of Christ shine through us into the darkness of the world,
Proclaim the good news of God's love by word and deed – when we do these things or see these things done, Jesus says, God's kingdom has come near.

Paul talks about the faithful being the Body of Christ. Each of us has been given gifts and talents to be used to further God's kingdom here and now. Each of us has an essential part to play to enable the functioning of this body of believers. We are Christ's hands and feet and voice in our world today, and working together we can, and do, give our weary, disheartened, and chaotic world a glimpse of what God's kingdom will be like. Whether we are checking on a friend, caring for a loved one, driving a neighbor to an appointment, preparing a meal for someone who is ill, helping to host Family Promise guests, donating to or volunteering at the food bank, speaking up for justice, supporting organizations like Christmas for Kids, or showing kindness and caring to those we meet, we are bringing God's kingdom near.

So while we believe God's Kingdom will come, we are not fearful or anxious about it. Rather, this knowledge encourages us to live our lives in a way that will fit us to appear in the presence of God. We are called to be engaged in God's world, to do God's work, to live as people of God, and to follow Jesus until he comes.

These days, we have so many distressing things going on in our world that weigh on our hearts. We are so tired of COVID-19, and yet we hear of another variant beginning to circulate. We are troubled by dissention and conflict between groups of people with differing outlooks and opinions. We are saddened by acts of violence that seem to occur daily. We are concerned about climate change, fires, and natural disasters. It's easy to begin to feel anxious or discouraged. But don't despair. We have hope because, as God's faithful people, we know that God will prevail.

My challenge to you this week, and this entire Advent season, is to look beyond the worries of this world and see where God is at work in your life and in the lives of others, here and now. If we are watching for the Kingdom of God, I think we will notice that it is indeed near. Amen.