



SAINT LUKE'S

"FIRST THINGS FIRST"

ADVENT 1
YEAR B

ISAIAH 64:1-9
PSALM 80
1 CORINTHIANS 1:3-9
MARK 13:24-37

A SERMON BY THE REV. CAROLINE STACEY

DECEMBER 3, 2017

Over four weeks, Advent shows us two faces of Jesus the Christ. This first Sunday of our new church year, we are shown not baby Jesus meek and mild but the Second Coming of Jesus as Christ in glory, in judgment and in power.

Advent is as much about endings as beginnings today. Jesus directs his followers' attention to signs of chaos, upending idols and temporary empires. When God acts in history, empires are overturned *before* new beginnings are born. Jesus speaks of signs in the heavens and stars falling. Mark's hearers would understand that Jesus is alluding to the recent destruction of the Temple in the Jerusalem in 70 AD – a devastating desecration that cries out for reversal. Signs in the heavens... What do you hear in Jesus words? I hear the apocalyptic portent of climate change: world-disrupting, refugee-making, famine-inducing global catastrophe that will upend and overwhelm our systems of relief and order and aid. No-one will be immune. We will either be displaced, or called upon to share insufficient resources with vast populations of migrant people living on a planet no longer able to sustain all its human life. There will be chaos and conflicts arising from scarcity of food and shelter.

Jesus cautions us against anticipating God's timetable. More than once in Scriptures, Jesus says: No-one knows God's timetable. God can be frustratingly imprecise. Jesus gives us only one instruction as we live out our lives between the First Coming and the Second: *keep awake*. How? What does this mean? I think that the balance between staying awake

and idolizing human agency and efficacy is a fine line. I think that for thoughtful people of faith, we sometimes forget that not everything is up to us. Jesus never offers purely human solutions. David Brooks recently wrote an article titled “When politics becomes your idol”.¹ In an age like ours, for some, politics has become *the* source of identity and meaning. Please do not misunderstand me: I find many recent political developments appalling in the blatant self-enrichment of the privileged and continued erosion of rights, dignity and opportunity in the middle classes and the poor. It is a creeping evil and poison in our nation. But political action and conviction cannot displace faith, church and community as the foundational dependency and sense of “who I am”. Jesus Christ is the gospel, not the democratic party or any other cause - no matter how worthy.

Idols of all kinds are what get overthrown in the Second Coming. As Brooks notes, idols are whatever we set up as ultimate that is in fact intermediate. Oh, but there are so *many* idols for us to choose from, even as people of faith! At first, idols are captivating because they improve my life: I love my smartphone and it is an awesome gadget....but technology doesn't fulfill the human heart. Recovering addicts know the desolation of making any substance or lifestyle our idol. Success, wealth and beautiful things give a real jolt of joy...but over time that often lessens, and can leave us feeling emptier than before. In the end, all idols fail us. That is one way we recognize an idol - it leaves us empty. We realize after crashing and heartbreak that we pinned our hopes on a false god.

¹ David Brooks in the New York Times; October 30, 2017: “When Politics Becomes Your Idol”

Bishop Dietsche at Diocesan Convention last month urged us to turn off the news and social media, to reclaim our minds. I think being informed is essential but I understand what he is getting at. We must have space and time to reflect. Sometimes we need to step back from more data and more opinions. Otherwise, we can become so reactive to the latest crisis and outrage that we become exhausted and empty, and our thinking and living becomes thinner and our responses shallow.

Abba Poemen, one of the desert fathers, said: "Do not give your heart to that which does not satisfy your heart."² In Advent, we give our hearts to Jesus Christ as Lord. *In your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord.*³ Jesus is the only Lord worthy of our heart. When we put Jesus at the center, anything or anyone else that we might be tempted to put there falls into its rightful place. Jesus at the center makes it possible for us to care for our neighbor and not burn out or despair. Jesus at the center means that there is always hope because we know that there is One greater than us who can be trusted to make right what we fail to achieve in human strength alone. *In your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord.*

So, Advent is above all to pause. We are called to prepare for Christmas in a radically different and counter-cultural way to grabbing cyber deals. Advent for Christians is not the season of shopping, it is the season of stopping. It is time to make more room for Jesus. Please take time to slow down, and I will try to do the same. Advent is for sweeping out the house of the soul. Advent is turning down the noise in our minds

² Abba Poemen, 4th century Egyptian desert father

³ 1 Peter 3:15

so that we have room for prayer, and church, and loved ones, and love of God and neighbor. We sweep the house of the soul so we can breathe. We sweep house so that there is room again in our heart, soul and mind for Love to be born.

AMEN

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