

Epworth Chapel on the Green
December 2, 2018
Advent 1
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

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

I want to begin the sermon today with a quote by C.S. Lewis, because I believe his words will help illumine for us our Scripture readings for today on this first Sunday of Advent. Lewis writes:

*Why is God landing in this enemy-occupied world in disguise and starting a sort of secret society to undermine the devil? Why is He not landing in force, invading it? Is it that He is not strong enough? Well, Christians think He is going to land in force; we do not know **when**. But we can guess **why** He is delaying. He wants to give us the chance of joining His side freely.*

*I do not suppose you and I would have thought much of a Frenchman who waited till the Allies were marching into Germany and then announced he was on our side. God **will** invade. But I wonder whether people who ask God to interfere openly and directly in our world quite **realise what it will be like when He does**.*

*When that happens, **it is the end of the world**. When the author walks on to the stage the play is over. God is going to invade, all right: but what is the good of saying you are on His side **then**, when you see the whole natural universe melting away like a dream and something else -- something it never entered your head to conceive -- comes crashing in; **something so beautiful to some of us and so terrible to others that none of us will have any choice left?***

*For **this** time it will be God without disguise; something so overwhelming that it will strike **either irresistible love or irresistible horror** into every creature. It will be too late then to choose your side. There is no use saying you choose to lie down when it has become impossible to stand up. That will not be the time for*

*choosing; it will be the time when we discover **which side we really have chosen**, whether we realised it before or not. **Now, today, this moment**, is our chance to choose the right side. God is holding back to give us that chance. It will not last forever.* [From *Mere Christianity*]

These words from Lewis help to open up to us the words of Jesus in our Gospel lesson this morning. Urging us to keep watch for his return in glory, he draws on Old Testament images of chaos and instability, of turmoil in the heavens, roaring seas, distress among the nations, and terrified people.

Jesus then invokes images from Daniel of the Son of Man coming on a cloud of glory. In the Daniel text, just before the prophecy of the coming of the Son of Man, the prophet says that “people will die of fright in anticipation of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.”

I understand that words like this can sound foreign and strange to modern ears. And truth be told, they can sometimes be a stretch even for those of us in the church.

But underneath these words lies a spiritual truth, which is this: If you are trusting in *anything* of this world to give you security and peace, your trust is misplaced.

And yet, one of the enduring convictions of human beings that we see demonstrated throughout history is that we can make things right if only we

can find the right political, economic, or cultural configuration. But such realities are temporal, and ultimately doomed to fail.

Deep down we know this, I think. But in terms of how we live our lives, think of how easy it can be to subtly shift our hope and confidence away from Christ and onto these more earthly, temporal systems.

Where, then, does our hope and confidence lie? C.S. Lewis reminds us. Our hope and confidence lies in the One who has promised to come again, not just privately into our hearts, but *cosmically* to the whole creation.

And if C.S. Lewis and the biblical writers are correct, Christ's coming again will literally be earth-shattering and mind-blowing. It will be so profound that you will no longer have the capacity to *decide* where you stand in life. All that will remain will be what you *have already decided*.

Naturally, a reality such as this produces one of two reactions. The first is fear and dread. The second is anticipation and confidence. And the difference between the two lies largely in the area of *preparation*.

Think for a moment. Why are people afraid to die? Largely because they are unprepared to die.

When I was in high school, I took a drama class one semester. I was not interested or motivated, and did not study. When the mid-term exam came, I had not studied a single bit. I still remember how I felt when the

exam was dropped onto my desk, and I looked it over and realized I knew none of the answers. My palms began to sweat, my heart was racing. I felt horrible. The source of my angst: I was *unprepared*.

Have you ever had the experience where you overslept, and when you were finally jolted out of your slumber, you get out of bed all in a hurry because you know you are late? You move at breakneck speed to try to get around, and mentally and physically things just kind of go haywire? You haven't had adequate time to prepare yourself for the day.

Take that feeling, and magnify it about a million times. Such will be the case for those unprepared for Jesus' return.

Advent arrives anew each year, calling on us to prepare. Its voices are sometimes blunt, harsh, and dissonant, but that's because they are attempting to rouse us from our slumber, to shake us from our complacency, to reveal *who* and *what* we are so that the One who is coming *again* might be born anew in us *now*.

And how does that happen? I'd like to suggest one very concrete and practical way that we can prepare our hearts during the Advent season. Actually, it's not my idea. I'm stealing it from the Apostle Paul. He shares it with the Christians at Thessalonica in our epistle lesson for today.

First Thessalonians is likely the very first book written in your New Testament, dating probably around A.D. 49. For the believers at Thessalonica, the world had already come to an end with the death and resurrection of Jesus. The whole world had been turned upside down, and now they were simply waiting with baited breath for Jesus to return and put the cherry on top of the parfait.

Paul encourages them to wait in a very tangible way. Do you know how? He prays for them, that their love for one another *may grow and overflow*. The result, he says, is that God will make their hearts strong and blameless for the day when Christ returns in glory.

Brothers and sisters, love is not just a noun. It's also a verb. It's like a muscle that constantly needs flexed and exercised. It involves both our attitudes and our actions. And Paul says that one of the best ways to prepare for Christ's coming again is to cultivate the virtue of love so strongly in your life that it pours into the lives of others.

Do you want to know how to thoroughly prepare yourself for Christ's return, and in the process deepen your own conversion? It's pretty simple. Begin looking for opportunities to show love to your friends, your family, and to your brothers and sisters in the family of God.

As the Advent season begins, I remind you today that *not only* did Jesus come to earth as a baby in Bethlehem; not only will he return in glory on the clouds – I also remind you that he comes to us *now*, in bread and wine.

In the Old Testament and in the images of Jesus, when the all-powerful God shows up, it's almost unsurvivable. But God doesn't want us to be struck dead when we see Him – so He comes to us in sacraments.

Here, at the Table, he comes to all of us this morning. May the grace we receive here cleanse and purify our hearts, so that our love for one another will overflow, and so that we will truly be prepared for his coming.

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