

Sermon for the First Sunday of Advent: Luke 21:25-36

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Happy New Year! We're starting Year C in the Revised Common Lectionary today, the beginning of a new liturgical year and the season of Advent. For those of you that need a refresher, the Revised Common Lectionary's the repeating three-year cycle of readings for Sunday mornings. It was published in 1994, and we share it in common with loads of Christian denominations. Our oldest version goes back to 1549, Catholics had their lectionary before that, and Jewish communities before them. Lectionaries serve as a sort of scriptural deployment device. They insure you'll hear a lot of scripture, and they keep me honest as a preacher. We've gotta deal with a considerable breadth of passages, even bits we don't like, and we can't handpick readings to make a point. Like Esther at Purim or shepherds at Christmas, the readings also emphasize the purpose behind our celebrations and serve as a kind of course corrective. The world or our baggage may catch us up in a tizzy, but the Lectionary recalls the weight our observances throw on us. That three-year cycle also gives the chance to lean into specific books one at a time. For example, we mostly hear one gospel a year with John sprinkled in like some kind of scriptural seasoning; Year C starts today, so we'll mostly hear from Luke in the months ahead.

On top of specific occasions, there's also the Liturgical Year or the Church Calendar. Our reckoning of time is weird, but it's not pointless. These calendars and readings serve a deeply important purpose: the way we figure time centers on the life of Christ. We begin on the fourth Sunday before Christmas with Advent, a season of preparation. Christmas starts at sundown on December 24 and stretches for twelve whole days of avian-heavy songs. Then there's Epiphany and the Season After, expanding the birth of Christ as a miracle for the entire world. Ash Wednesday puts mortality front of mind. Lent reminds us to make things right. Holy Week and Easter focus on sacrifice and new life. Easter stretches for 50 days, Pentecost's the birthday of the Church, and Ordinary Time takes all that stuff and invites us to live into it. We end with Christ the King and begin again with the next Advent. And all that reminds us every year that in spite of everything, God remains a constant. But while God remains a constant, we change, and when we come to a new Advent we're in a new place. Each year affects us, who we are now is new, and we get to learn what that means. Jesus says, "People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world." Some of us worry this year brings with it a very scary time, but Jesus doesn't leave us in fear and foreboding. He says, "when you see these things taking place, you know that the Kingdom of God is near." Weirdly, there's hope that while the world is at its worst, we get the chance to be at our best.

Now, Advent--the season we start today--holds a dual identity. There's the one that gets all the attention, the anticipation of Jesus' birth and all the cutesy stuff that comes with it. (Sidebar: the kitsch is strong this time of year: Advent calendars that don't really track Advent so much as count down a shortened December calendar, Ceramic Santas praying at Baby Jesus' side, even vanity plates of the blue-eyed, straw-bedded "Bambino of Bethlehem.") That reason for the season's a little saccharine for my tastes, but I get it. We need the kind of hope that comes with a newborn child, especially that newborn child. The other reason for the season, though, gets less play. The grown-up Jesus descending on clouds with a revolution in mind's a little scary. But with him we proclaim a different kind of hope that all can be made right. And "right" mostly means just, peaceful, and loving. We've gotten so focused on the coddling of the Christchild that we neglect his unnerving calls for justice. It's a whole lot nicer to hold a baby than it is to upset systems of oppression, but that's half the purpose of Advent, welcoming a child and a much-anticipated just world. The Christmas trees we put up, the presents we wrap, the hours on ladders untangling lights -- all preparation for the big day. That's great, keep doing those things. But remember to prepare for more.

This is not new. In the 1640s, the Puritans banned celebrations of Christmas to refocus on the actual reason for the season. They pendulum-swung too far, but their point was solid. All that fun distracted from our responsibilities to fight for justice, peace, and love now while anticipating their fullness in God's time. 200 years later, Frederick Douglass saw a chasm separating the Christianity he loved and the Christianity so many practiced. He wrote, "Between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference -- so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked. To be the friend of the one, is of necessity to be the enemy of the other." And now, nearly 200 years more, there are few times when the distinction between various Christianities is more clear than in the lead-up to Christmas. Some get riled up because Starbucks says "Happy Holidays" while others get riled up because injustice and oppression persist. See, some who claim the moniker of Christian have Christianity all backwards and don't think it stands for the things it stands for. But there are many that do see Christianity as a path of hope for those crushed by this world. Problem is, while lots of us do see justice, peace, and love as Christian values, we can't always recognize the need for justice, peace, and love growing right in front of us. Advent's partly carved out to look at our globe, our nation, our neighborhoods, neighbors, and selves and be honest about what we see. Where is there love, and where is there not? Where is there justice, and where is there not? Where is there peace, and where is there not?

Look, I know this is a hard time to take on something more. Trees and shopping and kid wrangling's only gonna get more demanding as the season wears on. But also, there's just so much hurt, so much fear, so much worry. Perhaps some can move those to the back of their minds for a few weeks, but we don't have that luxury. The cute baby side of the holiday's wonderful, and we certainly need joy, but joy's not enough. We also need reminders that all that hurt and fear and worry can't last, especially when Christians act like Christians and get to work. Advent's a season of preparation, and life's about to test just how prepared we are. Lean into the sweetness of the season, sure, but lean into the world-altering revolution of Christ, too. God knows the world needs both.

I don't care if you say Merry Christmas or Happy Holidays; seek justice. I don't care if you put up your tree now or wait 'til Christmas; promote peace. I don't care if your family likes their presents or slyly asks if you kept the receipts; make sure they know they're loved. Christmas is coming, folks. Remember who that baby is, and who that baby will become. And remember what that means for you. Salvation comes with his embrace, but it also comes with the promise to work for justice, for peace, and for love. 'Tis the season.