

The First  
Sunday of  
Advent

The Rev.  
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Advent 1B, Isaiah 64: 1-9, Mark 13: 24-37

*Expectation and Hope*

*"In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken."*

*Wow! Now that's the stuff of Christian nightmare—this is the bogeyman story that Sunday schools all over the world can use to frighten naughty Christian children. Take it out of context or fictionalize it and you can make a fortune out of writing fear mongering books as some fundamentalist authors have done.*

*Sitting here on the first Sunday Advent aren't we supposed to hear happy stories about how Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus are going to bring us Christmas?*

*Why are we hearing about the end of the world? Could it be that the beginning of the good news in the birth of this miraculous baby has something very important to tell us about the end of all things? After all, Jesus' birth was for the liberation of God's people, his coming again will only complete the task. That sounds like good news to me.*

So here we are once again at the beginning of that holy time when our waiting for the coming child is meant to be wed to the expectation that God can and does make all things new again. I think the season of Advent has arrived just in time for us this year.

We have the perfect opportunity to find our equilibrium in a world that just seems to spin faster and faster, making it very difficult to keep our balance and claim what is real and truly important in our lives.

As the economic gap between the richest and poorest in our world widens to new and heartbreaking proportions perhaps at no other time in recent history is this good news so sorely needed.

This year I hope we can all offer ourselves the extraordinary gift of finding more in this season than the demands to spin even faster and faster in this holy season as we spend our way into the perfect Christmas.

Perhaps this is the *very time* we need to refocus our energies in receiving the wonderful news that God is about the business of delivering hope. This season celebrates the knowledge that God delivers hope into the heart of a sometimes seemingly hopeless reality.

The demand to buy and spend, especially in difficult times, only accelerates our despair, but the promises of God in Christ reminds us that the miracle of God's presence among us is the only real gift that we need to make our lives complete.

The first coming of Christ saw a bright light breaking into human existence that revealed that the love of God for God's people was so strong and so deep that God was willing to go to any length to bring us joy and wholeness.

The first coming of this beautiful child illuminated a hope in the human heart that the world could be a place of justice and freedom for all people. This hope has not left us. This current global crisis is a *temporary* reality, but the promise of God---the promise to deliver God's people from hopelessness---that promise is *eternal*.

Listening to Jesus' words, as he sits with his disciples high on a hill overlooking the great Temple, you may well wonder if my words hold any truth. Even as they all gaze upon this magnificent structure that they understand as the center of their universe, Jesus tells them that soon not one stone would stand upon another and all of it would come crashing down.

The world as they knew it would end, he tells them, and in startling poetic language borrowed from scripture, he paints a vision of the very cosmos quaking as God reshapes the world into a new reality. Jesus has just told his disciples that he will die when he enters Jerusalem and they are naturally fearful of such a devastating turn.

But Jesus knows that not even his death at the hands of those he came to save will end God's love for God's people. He tells them to keep awake, to be alert to the truth that no manmade darkness can quench God's unassailable light.

Since Jesus' first coming we have been a world caught between darkness and Light; this is the great tension in which the season of Advent finds us.

Light is powerful presence in the created order. When I lived on a barrier island off the coast of Georgia I learned firsthand from nature how important it is to be able to distinguish God given light from that light which sparkles, but is not of God.

This part of the coast is a vital nesting ground for sea turtles. When the baby sea turtles break free from their eggs and leave the nest, it is the light of the moon over the water that leads them to their true home, the ocean.

Manmade light along the beaches is a great danger to them, it lures them further and further away where they are meant to dwell.

We too are meant to follow the Light of Christ into the fullness of life with God. But still it seems that like baby sea turtles we sometimes have trouble distinguishing the true light that leads us down into the waters of life from the bright lights that lure us away into an imitation of life.

The light that flickers from our televisions and computers with news of despair is not the source of life. The anxiety that comes along with the 24 hour news cycle does not bring us hope.

But the promise of Christ's return bringing new justice and mercy—that is what we are anticipating this Advent. We are living in hopeful expectation that Christ is coming again.

This is not horrible news, this is deliverance. The compassion and mercy he inaugurated in his first coming will pale in comparison to that which he brings on his second.

In that final great act of God there will be no horror. Christian hope lies in the knowledge that when the sun is darkened and the moon will not give its light, it is only because a greater Light is shining. The promise of the Advent of Christ means that seeing a star fall from heaven is simply an opportunity to make a wish.

The apocalyptic, nightmare scenario is simply bad fiction spun by modern false prophets who practice bad Biblical scholarship and want us to hear Jesus' words as threat.

But every indicator and portent that I can read says that these words are indeed a great promise---a promise of new life out of death and chaos.

Jesus tells us to keep awake and alert because God's power can and does break into human history at will.

Keep awake. This command implies that Jesus knows how easily we are distracted. If we forget that the coming child *is the gift* of Christmas we are little more than sleepwalkers in this world; a world that asks us every day to sell our souls for the latest, greatest version of something we already have—or never needed in the first place.

Advent asks us to examine what we think we know about God and to challenge the values of the world we live in. It reminds us that as those who follow Christ we stand between the competing gravitational pulls of deep desperation on the one hand and a bold confident trust in God on the other.

Desperation often finds us grasping for shiny objects in order to feel safe in a tumultuous world. And the difference between grasping for control and reaching for hope is vast. But bold confidence in God frees us to claim the grace and peace that says no matter what the present circumstances, we can trust in God's love and hope.

And more than that, bold confidence in God gives us the courage to *be* instruments of God's hope and love no matter who we are or where life finds us—young or old, rich or poor, employed or unemployed; Advent reminds us to throw off our self imposed fears and limitations, wake up, and claim God's hope as a present and eternal reality.

I'll finish with words that Oswald Chambers is reported to have said, "Expect great things *from* God and attempt great things *for* God. This statement captures the *very essence* of this Advent season.

So as we anticipate Christmas-- why don't we just pour ourselves out for the life of the world around us—a world that is in this moment struggling and lost. In the midst of the world's current crisis we can do *great* things for God and we can do it together. Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again! Amen.

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