

Sermon November 27, 2022 ... First Sunday of Advent

God for whom we wait, may we be attentive, watching and anticipating your coming among us. I speak in the name of God, Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today ... mark beginning of new liturgical year ... 1st Sun of Advent ... time of preparation ... spiritual renewal ... focusing on God coming among us ... all that means ... whether talking about the First Advent ... Jesus' birth in Bethlehem ... or second Advent ... promised return

Questions ... what are we expecting of this season ... what does Advent mean to us ... is it a spiritual time ... or are we drawn more and more into secular nature of season ... is it about being attentive to how we might glimpse God in our lives ... is it time of preparation ... if so preparation for what ... do we excitedly make that journey to Bethlehem with Mary and Joseph to witness coming God's Son ... is it about opening each door of advent calendar as Christmas gets closer to see treasure inside ... are we stressed by to do lists ... meeting our own expectations ... expectations of others ... feeling mounting pressures as Dec 25 gets closer ... are we done with commercial hype ... consumer culture ... or are we looking for next bargain

Wonder ... maybe it's all above ... both spiritual and secular aspects of season ... trying to be attentive to sacredness of these days ... while finding joy in more secular side of season too

Signs of Christmas ... are all around us ... music in the shops and stores ... Santa Clause parades ... festival of lights in Elgin Park ... lights on houses in neighbourhood ... decorated Christmas trees in the window ... eggnog on the store shelves ... there's a festive spirit in air

Hallmark Christmas movies ... Christmas tree lot ... community tree lighting and carol sing ... and especially blossoming love romance ... finishing up with happily ever after ending

No doubt ... they are a shlocky at times ... but also invite us into story ... brings out kindness of people ... and communities ... even when plot seems to be heading in another direction ... root for good ending ... where there is joy ... and truest meaning of what this season is all about

With ... all that as backdrop ... come to church today... ready to enter into joyous preparation for birth of Jesus ... start spiritual pilgrimage to Bethlehem ... what do we hear as a gospel reading ... Matthew's apocalyptic writing ... with images aren't warm and sensitive like those of hallmark movies ... rather of Parousia ... end of time ... even what some might call rapture

May appear ... apocalyptically there won't be happy ending like hallmark movies ... couldn't be further from truth ... God will never destroy what He has created ... never condemn us ... because loves us so much He wants nothing more than to save us ... and to save his creation too

Apocalyptic texts ... like what we heard moment ago ... sound ominous ... threatening ... full of uncertainty ... so much unknown ... and unpredictable ... and that we as human beings are powerless to control what ultimately happens ... when world does end ... as it one day will

Don't know about you ... but for me there's a tension there ... because I want to be watching ... waiting ... anticipating ... for coming of God among us ... with faith ... hope ... trust

But ... readings like gospel ... can inspire opposite ... when it comes to that penultimate experience of God coming among us ... with return of Christ ... fear ... anxiety ... stress

Left wondering ... what's his coming among us ... really going to mean ... what will it look like in our own individual lives ... what exactly will happen to me ... to us ... to all creation ... and when exactly can we expect it ... tomorrow ... 10 years ... 100 years ... 1000 years

Honestly ... I don't really know ... what to make of gospel passages like one heard today ... and what Jesus warned

Especially ... when he describes how ... *two will be in field ... one will be taken ... one will be left ... two women will be grinding meal together ... one will be taken ... one will be left.*

When read that ... apply it to ourselves ... suspect most of us hope ... we'll be ones taken ... assuming that to mean we have been chosen ... found worthy ... experience glory of God

And some ... simply assume of course they'll be the one chosen ... taken ... because of their faith ... and their faithfulness ... because they deserve it ... there's a feeling of entitlement

However ... isn't there a kind of spiritual arrogance ... in assuming that ... because in end ... do any of us really deserve ... to be chosen by God

This passage ... often used to justify ... some future kind of rapture

Honestly ... I personally struggle with any notion of a rapture ... because that implies there is limited space in Kingdom of God ... there is some point when no vacancy sign will go out ... that there isn't room for everyone ... as God hasn't made provision for each one He has created

I don't ... know any more than anyone else ... what final days will be like

But ... I do believe in what God promised ... about glorious kingdom ... and his reign of justice ... that becomes real for us in first advent ... birth of Jesus ... and which we anticipate in the second advent ... when Jesus will return in glory ... and bring to fruition here on earth all that is promised ... all that is at core of our faith ... as children of God ... followers of Jesus

I believe ... without question ... in God's grace ... love ... mercy ... forgiveness ... through Christ whose birth we will celebrate ... and who will indeed come again

Furthermore ... I believe that God doesn't want to inspire fear and trepidation in us ... God doesn't want us to be anxious or stressed ... as we watch ... wait ... for his coming among us

God's desire ... greet arrival with joy ... anticipating renewal of our spirits ... restoration of paradise here on earth ... recreation of everything destroyed and compromised over time .. and that it will happen through God's Son Jesus ... through his 1st Advent ... and 2nd Advent too

So ... how do we faithfully ... approach scripture texts ... like gospel for this morning ... and be inspired by them ... instead of wanting to simply avoid them all together

Apocalyptic writing ... doesn't need to overwhelm us ... lead to despair about what is to come ... fearing the worst possible scenario

Think ... get so drawn in part of story where one is taken, and one is left ... caught up in and stressed over what it might mean be one left ... subsequently miss point Jesus is really making

Jesus ... never says that world is ending ... not predicting end of world ... talking about how to live in the face of all that is unpredictable ... all that is definitely not under our controllable

Read ... that struck me as relevant ... need to remember that last days aren't new to us ... and to this millennium ... or even the last millennium either ... last days started 2000 years ago ... with ministry and teaching of Jesus ... with his life ... his death ... his resurrection

We're ... not first to struggle ... with this idea of the end of the world ... and how we can approach it spiritually ... with faith and faithfulness

Matthew ... writing to people asking same questions as we ask today ... wrestling with same tensions as we feel today ... and in sharing what Jesus taught about end of time ... he wanted to inspire hope ... faith ... and trust ... even though it was all so uncertain and unpredictable

Point ... Jesus wanted disciples to hear ... and us today too ... call to be awake ... to be ready ... even though we don't know exact moment ... we will experience God coming among us ... even though don't know fully all details of how it will come to be

It's about ... being prepared ... always in a state of readiness ... having been faithful in our lives ... to who God created us to be ... and how we have promised we would live our lives

Makes sense ... fears and anxieties ... as human as they are ... as much as can't control them ... paralyze us ... perhaps even compromising our hope ... faith ... trust ... in all God promises

Apocalyptic message ... doesn't have to be something that raises fear and trepidation in us

Can ... we experience any talk about end of times ... with joy ... full of hope ... faith ... and trust ... because we are assured by God what it will mean for us ... for all of His creation too

Even ... in uncertainty of today ... with all the signs out there that we might well be in the last days ... the wars ... disease ... natural disasters ... can we embrace anything that is apocalyptic in nature ... with hope filled anticipation ... because it will be like nothing we have experienced in this life ... in this world ... of that we can be sure ... because God has said it will be so

All Jesus asks ... we be watching ... waiting ... attentive ... and in all of that to do what we can to be prepared ... to greet that moment believing in all that God has promised us

So ... let's get practical ... about what you and I can do in our day to day lives ... in midst of chaos and confusion ... not knowing what future holds ... how can we be spiritually prepared ... and thereby remain spiritually attentive ... to what lies ahead ... with the coming of Christ ... both in a few weeks ... but even more so when He returns in glory

First ... stay connected to God ... keep prayer line open ... communicate with God ... esp. when feel stressed, discouraged & anxious ... God hears our prayers ... God will grant us peace ... which we can never create for ourselves ... world will never be able to offer to us

Second ... stay connected to community ... especially Christian community ... with others who are similar in their faith ... who are equally challenged ... Covid 19 pandemic has promoted isolation ... and necessarily distancing ourselves from one another ... out of concern for health and well being ... now is the time to re-imagine what being in relationship with each other means ... how we can grow a healthy community even right here at St. Paul's ... because being together is central to our faith ... and to our faithfulness too

Third ... stay connected to wider community ... as a presence beyond these walls that is visible and engaged ... especially among the marginalized and those in need ... we just might bring a kingdom moment into their experience of hardship ... and who knows ... we too might experience a moment of God's kingdom ourselves ... at the same time

Fourth ... stay hopeful ... grounded in faith God has blessed us with through His Son Jesus ... no matter how discouraged we might feel ... or even cynical ... don't let despair get the better of our faith ... even on the darkest day ... God's light shines ... when we don't know where to turn in life ... God will give us direction ... even when we are broken ... God's hand is upon us bringing health and well being ... even when everything around us is in chaos ... out of control ... remember God is ultimately the one who will bring about everything that will make this world as He desires it to be ... and everything we desire it to be too

Finally ... remember second coming isn't really an ending ... it's a beginning ... recreation of all that was good ... restoration of God's creation ... to state it was ... that he promised would be again ... that's filled with hope ... promise ... something to rejoice about for sure

As ... begin advent journey ... let's not get bogged down in things we don't understand ... or things we have no control over ... or details that potentially lead us to spiral ... and even lose the faith that is at the center and core ... of who we are ... and all God promises we will become

Let's ... trust in one whose birth we will celebrate ... and equally one who promises will come again ... because through Him ... everything we hope for ... long for ... will come to fruition

May it indeed be so ... thanks be to God ... Amen!!