

First Sunday of Advent
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
1 December 2024

Luke 21:25-36

Pictures of the end have terrorized many Christians for many generations. A rich and varied literature about the end of days has fascinated readers for several thousand years. Think for example of classics like Dante's *Divine Comedy* and C. S. Lewis' *The Great Divorce*, or LaHaye and Jenkins' runaway success, *Left Behind* books, which have captured our imaginations since 1995. We wonder what will happen when we die, if there will be a future for this fragile planet, and if there is anything to look forward to when this life on this planet or in this universe is finally over.

The First Sunday of Advent is a good day to think about these things. Today, Jesus tries to tackle the issue with his disciples. He answers the WHEN, the WHAT, and the HOW questions. In terms of the when, he affirms that we know neither the day nor the hour. Only the Father in heaven knows this, but there will be signs that we can point to when the time comes. He says, "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken."

People of all generations since Christ's resurrection have felt as though this end will come in their own time. Even we, in the year 2024, can see signs everywhere: wars in the Middle East and Ukraine, famine in Africa, political unrest in various parts of the world, the rise of totalitarian leaders, and political polarization in the West. We can see the rising of sea levels; powerful hurricanes, fires, tsunamis, and earthquakes; and pandemics like COVID-19. We can even see the declines in Christianity in the West. And when we see all of these signs, it is easy to see the end coming.

Christ also answers another question, what will happen at the end? He says, "The Son of Man will be coming in a cloud with power and great glory." The disciples are then to "stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." The what of the end of days is the return of our beloved Messiah, coming to fully realize the Kingdom aspirations he introduced at his first coming. God's glory will dwell on the face of the earth and God's kingdom of peace and love will be fully established.

There will be dark days before the end comes, but for those who believe in Christ, this end will be good news. This will be the great vindication of those whose faith has been placed in the Messiah. This will be a family reunion. Now Jesus answers a more important question than the when and the what. How do we prepare for the end of days? What do we do? Jesus says, "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

This is a very practical answer. "Stay alert and be prepared." Now, there are many who want to stay alert by watching the weather, trying to figure out which way the wind is blowing, uttering prognostications of when Armageddon will take place, trying to find a secret code in Revelation and other Holy Scriptures as to when the day will come. They become numerologists, doom's day prophets, and the moral police of the world. They spend a lot of words and a lot of ink trying to convince us that hurricanes Katrina or Harvey were God's punishment on sinful New Orleans or Houston. They are very busy trying to separate the wheat from the tares, telling the world about which groups of people are acceptable and which are to be condemned as we prepare for Christ's return.

I believe the "Stay alert" to which Christ refers in this passage is a more engaged and loving invitation. We are to stay busy building God's kingdom even now. There is one last command he leaves us and that is not "Cleanse the world of those you don't believe measure up!" Rather, it is "Love one another as I have loved you." We are to remain busy building the beloved community of brothers and sisters taking care of each other and taking care of God's creation. We remain alert by keeping our ear to the ground, our hands to the plow, our feet in motion, our minds engaged in practical solutions for what afflicts our communities and our world. May God find us busy building a community deeply rooted in love and service of others.

In preparation for this sermon, I reviewed other sermons on this passage over the years, and I must acknowledge that I have been very concerned about the future of Christianity and what some call the death of the Church. And over the years I have blamed secularism, liberalism, consumerism, and other cultural trends for the decline of our faith. In 2012, I quoted an article by The Economist, which said, "The greatest woes (in Church decline) await the Anglican Church... The glue that holds together this curious Protestant-Catholic hybrid is weakening. There will be more splintering in 2013. Anglicans in Africa will go their own way, in

partnership with like-minded conservatives from America. They are appalled by theological liberalism... especially on issues of sexual morality... the Evangelical parishes within Anglicanism will remain lively and wealthy. But they are the exception, not the rule. The typical Anglican and Episcopal parish will be older, smaller, shabbier, and more female in 2013, with fewer services, less cash and an over-stretched ministry” (Edward Lucas, “Christianity at Bay.” *The Economist*, November 2012). I then encouraged a number of postures to combat these trends.

It is clear that I too was looking at signs, counting the days, measuring my response to what I saw as the beginning of the end. But I don’t believe this passage invites us to cry out against the world, as much as it invites us to transform the world. During the season of advent, we prepare for the coming of our Savior. This coming takes three different forms: Coming as in the commemoration of Christ’s first coming, which we celebrate at Christmas. A second form of coming has to do with the coming at the end of the age, when Christ will finally bring the whole world to himself and will come in glory to judge the quick and the dead, as Scripture announces. The third form of coming Advent prepares for is the daily coming of Christ into believers hearts, as people everywhere open their hearts to Jesus. The passage today is talking about all of these events, which means that we prepare for the coming of our Savior by welcoming him into our hearts and lives every day. We transform the world by transforming our lives, then our homes, then our communities through practical, consistent, and efficient acts of love.

I believe the time has come for the Church to stop worrying about the end of Christianity and to start living the lives Christ wants us to live. God alone can save his Church; our duty is to be the most authentic believers we can be. To love, to serve, to pray, to encourage each other to wakefulness and action, and to lead lives filled with hope and joy. Christ will take care of the rest. Amen!