

Finding Hope in Upheaval

Sermon by Pastor Patrick Fish
Luke 21:25-36
First Weekend in Advent
December 1-2, 2018

*Grace and peace to you from God,
who continues to come down to us.
Whose promises give us hope. Amen.*

Move 1: Introduction to Advent

This weekend marks the beginning of Advent. A season of waiting, longing, promise, and preparation.^[1] It's a time of newness, when we refocus and remember again all God does in our lives.

But it's hard to find that space to re-center when this is such a busy time of the year. There are presents to buy. Christmas décor to put up. Christmas cards to send out. Food to cook and cookies to bake. Do. Do. Do. Prepare. Prepare. Prepare.

But what happens is that we get lost in it all. The noise. The lights. And before we know it, it's December 27, and we wonder how that month even happened.

We forget this time between now and Christmas. This "in between" time that is a perfect time to pause and renew. To hear again not the old news, but the good news that never gets old. That God arrived. That God continues to come down to us as God did in the Christ Child.

My seminary professor, Mary Haemig, argues that we need to reclaim the word "Advent," a word that means "arrival" or "coming." In Advent, we don't just remember the one time God arrived. We praise and proclaim throughout this season that God continues to come and continues to arrive in our lives.

As Christ's followers, we reflect on all the past and present ways in which God has and is breaking in. And we rejoice that God will continue in the future to respond to whatever happens.

Yet, despite all that, we pause to recognize and name all the upheaval that has been occurring in the world over the past week.

Tear gassing children seeking asylum. Fires destroying entire towns in California. Earthquakes decimating cities in Alaska. Our world cries out. We acknowledge

the pain and suffering in the world. We, as the Church, don't stay silent or turn our heads.

Instead, we stand up and raise our heads. For we know God is at work. Not causing destruction or suffering. But, instead, we place our hope knowing God promises to bring about new life and restoration.

Advent is about preparing ourselves to receive again the Good News. It's about remembering all God has done. But it's also about confidently waiting. Hopefully anticipating.

We still are waiting, longing, and yearning for a time when the brokenness of the world will be transformed into fullness. We are awake. Alert. Ready. Knowing God is actively working to make this happen. As God has done in the past, God will do in the present and future.

This all sets up and explains the reasoning behind having an apocalyptic passage to kick off Advent. Luke 21 seems like an odd choice for today's Gospel. Talk about getting us in the cheery, joyful spirit . . . let's talk about destruction and the end times! Before moving into the preparation for the coming of Christ and a new age, we need to make sure we begin with the end of history.[2] Weird, right?

Move 2: "Both/And" of Christian life

But there's wisdom in this. During Lent, we tend to want to jump straight past Holy Week and Good Friday, and go straight to Christ's glorious resurrection on Easter.

We tend to do the same during Advent. We want to jump straight to the joy and excitement of the Christ Child. But before we get to Christmas, we pause to reflect on this time in between.

We recognize that, for some of us, these days in between aren't so cheerful. Some of us will be spending Christmas alone because we have recently divorced. Some of us have lost loved ones, and this is the first Christmas we will spend without them. Some of us lost jobs or had a pay decrease and don't know how we will afford gifts.

Christian life entails both comfort and struggle. We want to believe that if we have faith, our lives will be all figured out and peachy. But the truth is, in this life, we will experience hardship. We will endure pain. Each and every one of us.

It has nothing to do with us being weak or strong. Good or bad. It has to do with our shared humanity. Christian life entails both trials and vindication. Destruction,

death, and betrayal happen, but God arrives and comes in the midst of it all bringing us hope.

Both/and.

This season is a time of both excitement and sorrow. Both struggling and hopeful.

So while our Gospel may seem to be out of place with the season, it's actually perfect because it causes us to pause and wonder. About the both/and of Christian life. About the both/and that exists during this season of Advent.

Move 3: Scripture

The author of Luke was writing to a Christian community who, much like us, were people trying to make sense of the turmoil being experienced throughout the world. Some of them found themselves feeling far more lost than found. Far more sorrowful than hopeful.

They were wondering when Christ would come again. When God would intervene and put an end to human suffering and struggle.

At the center of the passage is the both/and of the Kingdom of God. Christ assures them—and us—that the Kingdom of God is here and is drawing near. Already present and not yet.

This is about Jesus preparing his followers and caring about how we orient ourselves with the world. Jesus' main concern here is with our disposition to the world.[4]

Christ calls us to be alert and not get caught up in the extravagance of life. Instead, we are called to be watchful, to expect God to show up. To be confident when events occur because we know they signal God's Kingdom is near and God's deliverance is coming.[5]

We live in this in between. Between Christ's coming into the world and Christ's coming at the end to triumph over all the powers of this world.

During this in between, we can have hope even when waiting is stressful and challenging. We can live knowing struggle and death are not our end.

Our time. Our story. Our life — made secure through Christ.

As we prepare ourselves over these next few weeks, with all the lights, decorations, trees, and gifts, we can hold on to God's vision for the world. A

vision that is breaking in and beyond what we could ever imagine. A vision that gives us hope. Advent brings us hope of the everlasting, of a future that will never pass away.[6]

Here in this odd, unusual passage that kicks off our Advent, we hear of BOTH the struggle we will experience here on earth AND God's vision for how God will transform brokenness into wholeness.

We recognize our own struggles and see the struggles in our world. But we don't have to lose hope. Instead, we can stand and hold our heads up high . . . because of the AND. Because we don't stop at suffering. That's not our end point as Christians. Death is not the end of our story. Disease isn't the end of our story. Darkness isn't the end of our story.

Life, health, and light are our story.

We live assuredly knowing the "Kingdom is not far off, it is not waiting, it is not undiscovered, it is right here in the Son of Man and in His Word that never fades, never ceases and never passes away." [7]

Move 4: Surgeries + Grateful Grannies

Two years ago today, I was undergoing my fifth surgery on my neck. I had a cyst on my thyroid that wouldn't go away. Every day I see my scar, but I don't cringe. I give thanks. It's a tangible sign to me of how God pulled me through.

I say that now with perspective. But two years ago, I was not in a good place. It was one of the rougher times in my life. At that time, we were living in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Lovely place. Lovely people. But it was just a little too far away from our families, who live here.

Ellie was sixteen months and as rambunctious as ever. And my wife was six months pregnant with little Maddie. During my surgeries, I wasn't very with it. I was on pain meds and had doctor's appointments at least once, if not twice, a week. Life was chaotic, stressful, and exhausting.

At the time, I had a difficult time with God. I was bitter and angry, feeling it was just Katie and I doing this on our own. Those few months. But as I reflect back, I realized that wasn't true at all.

The congregation I was serving was super loving and understanding. They were great. My family traveled numerous times back and forth from Illinois to help.

And the people who really got me through it were the nurses and doctors overseeing my care through all those surgeries. By my fourth surgery, I was a regular and knew everyone at that ENT office.

They turned into my family for those few months. They didn't just care about my neck, they cared about my livelihood. They knew about my family and were wonderful to Ellie when she came with me to the doctor's office.

A few days after my fifth surgery, I got a phone call from a number I didn't know. I never pick up from unknown numbers, especially when I'm not feeling well, but for whatever reason, I answered.

It was my surgeon. He asked if he could come by the house and see how I was doing. I thought it was a bit odd, but I said, "Sure. Come on by."

An hour later, he showed up. And right away, I felt a little awkward. He didn't have on his normal get up. No white doctor coat. No stethoscope. No fancy shoes. Who was this guy?

He shared how he was there, not as my doctor, but as a fellow disciple. He shared how he'd been praying for my family and me. And how he felt he needed to do something. So he brought over soup for dinner and diapers for the girls.

I still remember that visit. I remember how blessed I felt. How grateful I was. That although I was going through hell, feeling tons of pain, I felt hope. I felt warmth. I felt comfort.

God reached out through my surgeon. I have no doubt.

The surgeon's visit helped give me perspective of the both/and of Christian life.

Yes, I had experienced tremendous pain. And I had also experienced incredible comfort. After that I was able to stand and raise up my head.

After that experience, I decided I wanted to find a way to pay it forward. I prayed God would open up an opportunity for me to do so.

A day later, I was out buying Christmas presents for Kate and Ellie at Target. And as I'm walking through the aisles praying for inspiration to find the perfect gift, I kept seeing these two older women wandering around.

They look a little puzzled as to what they were looking for. So I thought I would just ask to see if they needed any help.

They shared that they were a part of a ministry called Grateful Grannies. They were buying gifts for children in need who otherwise wouldn't get Christmas presents.

And they were wondering why a young child would want an "Ax." And if it was appropriate for them to buy it or not.

I helped them realize what the young boy wanted was Axe Body Spray, not a Paul Bunyan-type ax.

After that experience, our congregation partnered with Grateful Grannies, and the following Advent we joined them in providing Christmas presents to over 100 children in Cedar Rapids.

During this season of Advent, we rejoice in the truth and promise that God continues to come to us. And we give thanks that God empowers and equips us to join in God's restorative work. To show the world that suffering is not the end. Darkness and destruction aren't the only part of the story.

The promise that gives us hope is that our story always entails God's light, which never goes out.

We look at the Advent candle, and we are reminded that God's Word, God's Promise, will never pass. It is how we endure. It is why we continue to be the church for the sake of the world.

Amen.

Resources

- [1] "Sprouting Leaves" Advent, Christmas, Epiphany 2018-2019. *Seasons of the Spirit*, December 2, 2018.
- [2] Lose, David. "Commentary on Luke 21:25-36," workingpreacher.org. November 29, 2009.
- [3] Dinkler, Michal Beth. "Commentary on Luke 21:25-36," workingpreacher.org. December 2, 2018.
- [4] Lose, David. "Commentary on Luke 21:25-36."
- [5] Lose, David. "Commentary on Luke 21:25-36."
- [6] Lewis, Karoline. "Nothing Lasts Forever," DearWorkingPreacher. workingpreacher.org. Nov. 25, 2018.
- [7] Jacobson, Karl. "Commentary on Luke 21:25-36," workingpreacher.org. December 2, 2012.

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Reflection Questions

- *What "worries of this life" are weighing you down?*
- *Where do you see God at work today?*
- *When is a time you experienced hope in the midst of a struggle?*