

Sermon for Advent I—Year C 2018
There Will Be Signs . . .

Some of you are about cringe
however, I'm sincerely not asking for curiosity sake,
I'm asking because I truly wonder . . .
How many of you think we are living in "end times"?
Just a show of hands . . . I see some of you shaking your heads yes.
Now, I want you to take a moment and consider
on what do you base your belief that we are in "end times"?
Is it because the world has so changed
from what you feel is "familiar" or "proper" or "expected"?

Currently, most of us have lived through a period of transformation
that previous generations, other than the industrial age,
could not have really imagined.

I've actually preached this before: our technology has far advanced our
ability to wisely appreciate and use it.

We are living in dizzying, disorienting times.

It puts me in mind of the famous opening lines of Tale of Two Cities
by Charles Dickens:

*It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,
it was the age of wisdom,
it was the age of foolishness,
it was the epoch of belief,
it was the epoch of incredulity,
it was the season of Light,
it was the season of Darkness,
it was the spring of hope,
it was the winter of despair,
we had everything before us,
we had nothing before us,
we were all going direct to Heaven,
we were all going direct the other way—*

To be honest, these are the lines
I always think of whenever “end times”
are introduced into the conversation.

The First Sunday of Advent is no exception.
The paradox of Advent is
that we start the beginning of a new church year
by contemplating “endings.”
Which may be the reason so many Christians find Advent
such a puzzling (and disappointing) season.
Frankly, the stories we hear in Advent are rarely childhood favorites.
Advent makes us wait for the “good stuff”:
the star in the east, the magi, the angels, the shepherds,
the babe in the manger.
There are very few touching moments—
well, except, perhaps,
the Fourth Sunday of Advent in this year’s lectionary
when the sympathetic and lovable figures of
Elizabeth and Mary have a love and praise fest . . .
So come to church on Sunday, Dec 23rd to revel in that!

No, the readings we hear in Advent
are drawn from the harsher soil of human struggle and dashed dreams.
Sin still reigns and, it seems, hope might be on vacation.
I can’t really blame anyone who prefers
the major notes of joy and gladness of Christmas
to the minor keys of Advent.

On top of everything else,
Advent also leaves us somewhat distracted
with its constant drumbeat of “time marches on” and all that . . .
It leaves us with a kind of nagging toothache . . .
day after day, year after year, with everything *unpredictable*.

Just when will the day of the Lord arrive?
When will “those days” and “at that time” come to be?

Of course, for us, this “time” of Advent
is frustrating since we know that “the baby” has been born.
And has grown into manhood.

And has lived and died . . . oh, yes, and lives again,
and will return again.

But, we know not when.

So, you could say that we have some common ground
with those who first longed for Jesus, the Messiah,
the One who was promised, to appear.

We, too, are waiting for him to appear . . . *again*.

The prophet Jeremiah preached to those
who waited while they were far from home, far from the familiar.
Jeremiah prophesied to those who were in exile,
who certainly thought they were in the worst of times,
when nothing was before them,
when everything was, well, excuse the expression, going to hell.
How many of you think that this is an apt description of life today?

Jeremiah was preaching to people who were in Babylon.
Living in Babylon, the Jewish people experienced first persecution
and then indifference for about 80 years.
The Jewish people were experiencing a *double* wilderness experience.
The first wilderness experience
was when they wandered with Moses 40 years
in the desert before coming into the promised land.
Now their second wilderness experience was twice as long—
a little over 40 years as exiles in Babylon.
A place that brings forth echoes of the tower of Babel
where no one speaks your language,
no one understands or even cares about what you long for.

Does any of this seem familiar to any of you?
Do you feel as if you are living in Babylon?
Is the world you knew crumbling around you?

I suspect that all of us feel this way
no matter where we identify ourselves
on the right or the left of political, social, religious spectrums.
It [is] the best of times, it [is] the worst of times,
it [is] the age of wisdom,
it [is] the age of foolishness,
it [is] the epoch of belief,
it [is] the epoch of incredulity,
it [is] the season of Light,
it [is] the season of Darkness,
it [is] the spring of hope,
it [is] the winter of despair,
we [have] everything before us,
we [have] nothing before us,
we [are] all going direct to Heaven,
we [are] all going direct the other way—

So, what do we do when we are wishing, hoping,
and waiting in Babylon?
Now there's a good question!

Growing up, Advent was not really a season I can remember
in any particular way except, perhaps,
that the weeks before Christmas were filled with letters to Santa
and memorizing a verse for the Sunday School Christmas pageant.
My daughter, however, would tell you that Advent
was marked by an Advent calendar which hung on a closet door.
This Advent calendar had four- dimensional boxes
rather than one-dimensional doors

that opened to reveal messages along with small “surprise” gifts, like a chocolate or other clues to find what the Advent “fairy” had left for her.

I wonder if my daughter now thinks of the season of Advent as a “foretaste” of Christmas—surprises every day until the day. Perhaps that might give us some insight into what Advent is actually all about.

What if while we’re waiting in Babylon
(the not quite promised land place)
we thought of Advent (and every day of our lives)
as a “foretaste” of what is to come?
What if we looked for God “surprises” every day
until *the day of the Lord*?

What if we looked forward to the future one day at a time?

Lutheran pastor, Heidi Neumark, wrote in her book, *Breathing Space*, that
Advent is how I feel much of the time.
I might not feel sorry during Lent,
when the [church] calendar begs repentance.
I might not feel victorious, even though it is Easter morning.
I might not feel full of the Spirit,
even though it is Pentecost and
the liturgy spins out fiery gusts of ecstasy.
But during Advent, I am always in sync with the season.
Advent unfailingly embraces and comprehends my reality.
And what is that?
I think of the Spanish word, anhelo, or longing.
Advent is when the church can no longer contain its unfulfilled desire
and the cry of anhelo bursts forth:
Maranatha! Come, Lord, Jesus!
O Come, o come, Emmanuel!

No matter what time you believe or feel you are living in,
a person of faith longs for Christ to come,
for Christ to be with and among us,
for Christ to fulfill God's promise to us, we who are a "waiting people."
Now Advent . . . at least for me,
is no longer a countdown to Christmas,
but as Pastor Neumark describes it,
it is the reality of my life and my world.
The gospel texts about the destruction
of the temple, war, earthquakes, famines, plagues, and betrayals
take on new and often very personal meanings.
Advent becomes a season of change, a season of letting go,
and a season of looking to a future that is not yet clear or known.
I'm not exactly sure when it began
or how it happened,
but I know that my perspective on Advent has changed.
All the signs were there.

Looking back, I know there were times
when I wondered how things had come to this point
that even though I thought I had done everything right,
everything felt and was all wrong . . .
"There will be signs," Jesus said.

Perhaps my perception about Advent changed
when I read the headlines
and felt as if my prayers were unable to keep up
with the pain and the needs of the world.
"There will be signs," Jesus said.

It may have been waking up with the world each morning of the past
year wondering, "What's next? Where will it happen?
When will it take place?"
"There will be signs," Jesus said.

It may have been any one of these or all of them
or a thousand other things just like them.
These are just a few “Advent” moments
where life and the world as I had known it
were changed and even, in a way, ended.
What are your Advent moments, your Advent stories?
I’m sure you have them.
I’m sure you could tell of moments
when your life changed and the world as you knew it ended.
I’m sure you have lived through seasons of change,
seasons of letting go,
seasons of stepping into an uncertain future,
even a future you did not want.

Yes, you and I may wish that Advent was as simple
and easy as opening a little door on a calendar,
and eating a piece of chocolate
and knowing that Christmas is one day closer.
But . . . forgive me . . . it’s not.
You and I both know the world is not that simple,
and life is not that easy.
Maybe that’s one reason every year on the First Sunday of Advent,
we always need to hear a gospel text
that seems to describe the end of the world
with signs that will accompany that ending.
This is not just a story about Jesus and his disciples
for two thousand+ years ago.
This is your story and my story . . . here and now.
We will always need to hear a gospel text
that describes the end of the world,
and the signs that will accompany that ending.
Because we experience endings throughout our lives.

Because we witness end times in our world.
And, because, today the Church declares it to be the good news
of Jesus Christ.

“There will be signs,” Jesus said.
More than ever our world needs to see the signs.
The longer I live, the more I see and experience,
the more I realize how necessary those signs are.
And I want to be reminded that the signs are there.

Every Advent story is accompanied by signs.
Jesus says if we look, we’ll see the signs everywhere;
in the sun, the moon, the stars;
in the distress among earth’s nations;
and in the roaring of the sea and its waves.
I’ve certainly seen the signs when I look back
and I can see them today
in the pictures of the world’s distress and violence.

I have no doubt you’ve seen the signs, too, in your life.
They are everywhere and they are not difficult to spot.
They are, however, too easily and quickly misunderstood and misused.

“There will be signs” are words of hope and reassurance
but far too often they are heard
as words of warning and threat.
And when they are, the signs are used to predict a future
of impending doom and loss.
They become indicators that the world will end
and you better shape up or God is going to get you.
Our misunderstanding of the signs pushes us
further into the darkness and deeper into our fear.
Our misuse of the signs blinds us to the coming of the Son of Man
with the power of love and the glory of mercy.

“There will be signs,” are not Jesus’ words of warning and threats. Jesus does not ask us to predict the future. He never says these are the signs that the end of the world has come. Instead, he says that when we see the signs we are to stand up, raise our heads, and know that help is on the way. Our redemption, our healing, our Savior has and is drawing near. The signs are not a reason to hang our head in despair or shrink from life.

That we can see the signs in our lives and our world means that the circumstances we face and the events that happen contain and reveal the promise of Christ’s coming again, but, also, the presence of God in the midst of them. The signs are our hope and reassurance that God has not abandoned us. that God notices us, that God’s cares, comes to, and participates in our life’s circumstances . . . in, with, and through the best and the worst of times.

The Advent signs are as ordinary and common as a fig tree sprouting leaves, or so our Lord Jesus teaches us. We see the leaves and we know something is happening—we know new life is happening. It’s a new season, new life, new growth, new fruit. That is the promise and good news of Advent signs. And yet, that good news, is fulfilled not apart from, but in and through *the reality* (the best and worst times) of our life’s circumstances and our world’s events, no matter how heaven-bound or hell-bound they may be.

What if we looked on our lives and our world
and began to read and understand
the signs in the Advent moments of our lives as sprouting leaves?
What would we see? What would it mean?

I believe It would mean that the kingdom of God is near.
It would mean that we are entering a new season.
We would see new life and new growth.
And we would produce new fruit.
We could open the doors of our life with new courage and confidence.
We could look on the world with a new sense of compassion and hope.
We would be strengthened to do the work God
has given each of us to do.

Yes, the Advent seasons of our lives can be long, difficult, and painful.
But we never face those seasons
without the signs of hope and reassurance,
signs that point to the One who was, who is, and who will be.

“There will be signs,” Jesus said.

So, now, what if, we looked for God’s surprises in our lives
each and every day?
What if we saw the signs of the One
whose promises are worth living for in every time and every place?
What if we, in every circumstance, in every time,
and in every reality prayed, “Even so, Lord Jesus, quickly come!”

“There will be signs,” Jesus said. And, dear friends,
*When we [see] these things begin to take place,
stand up and raise your heads,
because your redemption is drawing near.*