

Looking Up

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the First Sunday of Advent, November 29, 2015.

Jesus said, "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on earth distress among nations." Luke 21: 25

Advent is a time of anticipation and expectation, a time of discerning how God intervenes in human history. The Advent wreath reminds us that God's love is never ending. The evergreens remind us not only of the gift of life, but of our need to grow in the knowledge of God as revealed to us in Christ. The candles mark the four weeks of preparation for Christmas.

Christianity began as a sect within Judaism that anticipated Christ's coming again as a sign of the end of the present age. This phenomenon is known by various terms, including the Apocalypse, the Eschaton and the Parousia. The early Christians fully expected that the end would happen in their lifetime, marked by great turmoil. By the next generation, in the year 66 A.D., the revolt of the Jews was seen as a sign that God was bringing the present age to an end. Just four years later, in 70 A.D., Jerusalem fell and the temple was destroyed. This marked a new era for Christians, shifting their emphasis from expecting the end times to spreading the gospel of hope in Christ. They realized that, despite our tendency for self-destruction, only God could bring on the end of the world. Ultimately, time is measured in God's terms and not our own.

Centuries before, in the sixth century, B.C., the prophet Jeremiah lived through great chaos and confusion that ended in the defeat of the Israelites and their dispersion into exile, an era known as the diaspora. The prophet assures the people Judah that they will ultimately return to live in peace and security under a new king, a descendent of David, who will rule with justice. The longed for messiah was expected to bring an end to the chaos assuring that God would prevail in a new order. Christians came to believe that the end time would be less a catastrophic event and more the emergence of a world transformed into a new order under God.

In our own time we live with the specter of religious extremists reacting in their hatred and destruction of what they see as infidels in a corrupt and decadent society. Though we live under the constant threat of terrorism, we hold to signs of hope and assurance that God will prevail. We can be part of making the way for a better world by getting our priorities in order and developing a greater sense of regard for each other. To engage in mutually supportive relationships is what the Greeks called *Koinonia*. More than a philosophy, more than an institution, more than a mere organization, Christianity is a community of believers who base our hope and expectation that God entered the human condition in the person of Christ to lead us out of chaos and fear.

A revival of an ancient form of meditation is to follow a circular walk known as a labyrinth that begins by entering on the outside along a path that ultimately leads to the center. As we walk the labyrinth of life, we are reminded that God is the center of our ultimate destination.

God comes to us in surprising ways, entering again and again in the drama of human history. We look to God to break the silence of our waiting, to transform our lives, to renew our hopes for the present and to restore our faith in the future. It is in these uncertain times that we seek a restoration of a sense of holiness in our lives.

Advent is a time of waiting and expectation, but if you're anything like I am, you don't like to be kept waiting. The characters of Vladimir and Estragon in Samuel Beckett's 1955 play, *Waiting for Godot*, are waiting for some unknown authority figure that never appears. "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes; it's awful!"

We grow impatient waiting for an overdue child to be born, for people who are perpetually late, for deliveries that never arrive and repairmen who never appear. After centuries of oppression and prejudice, marginalized people still wait on the sidelines. Though we believe in equality of opportunity, those who have the power to do something to change the inequities need to be vigilant and act forcefully.

God's promises are be less an illusion and more of a reality if we are part of making them real. We must not allow ourselves to exercise a spiritual veto by standing in the way of what God intends for us. As citizens of God's realm, we need to be an integral part of God's plan for us. We need to be creative in cultivating the very best in each other. Each generation need to affirm the possibility of a better future by assuring the next generation that they share the responsibility of improving the quality of life.

If there is to be a culmination of this age, there will be no time for hesitation. We have to be prepared by living our lives in a state of readiness by being the visible presence of Christ. There have been signs in the past as there are signs in the present of the threats of destruction by terrorists bent on our destruction. We must not try to flee from the city of God to wait it out in the spiritual suburbs. Being citizens of God's realm means getting involved and taking a stand for what we believe is right and good and true against what is evil and false. Just as there are fact checkers during political campaigns, we must remain vigilant against all forms of demagoguery, particularly in the plight of Syrian refugees. Last Thursday we celebrated a holiday that originated with some of the first refugees to enter this country nearly 400 years ago.

Let us be up and doing as instruments of God's purposes. If we don't exercise our role and responsibility as a conscience in society, then we get what we deserve. The better we are at doing our job as Christians, the more hope there is for the future. We have to avoid overreacting, whether it is a policeman emptying sixteen rounds into a young black man or the shooting down of a Russian plane flying over a portion of Turkish air space.

This Advent season is a good a time to make the necessary changes in our lives to live up to what we say we believe that will lead to a new order of peace and reconciliation. Advent is our time to prepare for celebrating the birth of Christ who came to save us from ourselves and from our fears that cause us to overact. We lift our heads in joyful expectation of a new world order in which God comes to us again and again to individuals and nations alike.