

Yr. C, Advent 1
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St. Martin's in the Fields Episcopal Church
1559 Words

Lessons: Jeremiah 33:14-16
Psalm 25:1-9
1 Thessalonians 3:9-13
Luke 21:25-36

Welcome to the first Sunday of Advent. Coming on the heels of Thanksgiving with the nostalgic warmth it evokes, and now all things Christmas flooding over us on the radio and in stores and along streets, the Church shakes its finger and says, “not so fast—we’ve got to prepare ourselves.”

Many of us could tolerate this seasonal arrhythmia well enough, so long as our clergy don’t frown at our Christmas decorations or make us feel guilty about hosting a Christmas party before December 24th.

But then Jesus opens his mouth and warns of gloom and doom, frightening signs in heaven and on earth, distress among nations, roaring seas, fear and foreboding. Surely, there are better ways to say, “Happy New Year!” than that.

It *is* a new year, a new beginning. But the problem with today’s Gospel is that it is the beginning of the *end*. In fact, these are Jesus’ last words before Judas begins collaborating with those who want to kill Jesus.

Do you ever fear that *we* are seeing the beginning of the end? We live in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world, and many of the experts we count on to help us see more clearly seem to point to signs of danger and fear.

Those with expertise about global warming look at signs in the heavens and on earth, and they warn us about the danger of environmental calamity.

Those with expertise about military conflict look at signs in places like Afghanistan and Iraq, Pakistan and Iran, and they warn us about the danger of war.

Those with expertise about disease look at signs like mutating germs and drug-resistant bacteria, and they warn us about the danger of untreatable illness.

Those with expertise about economics look at signs like failing banks and crashing markets, and they warn us about the danger of financial collapse.

I finally “threw in the towel” on Friday and went in search of some apocalyptic inspiration by going to see the movie, “2012.” The opening scene of the movie takes place in 2009 as a pair of scientists far down in a copper mine see some dangerous and fearful geological signs.

This is the beginning...the beginning of the end.

In some ways this movie about geological calamity and worldwide tsunamis could have been launched with Jesus words in today’s Gospel when he says, “There will be signs 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...”¹

Supposedly, there was some prediction from the ancient Mayan Civilization of geological doom slated for 2012 (during the season of Advent, no less!). And in addition to bewildering us with special effects, and inching us

¹ Luke 21:25-26

toward the edge of our seats, the movie also tries to inform our moral and ethical imaginations with exaggerated depictions of cowardice and bravery, despair and hopefulness, betrayal and reconciliation.

Just as in the case of ancient Israel, the first casualties in a crisis where lots of power and money are at stake—the first casualties are always the truth-tellers.

I'm not necessarily suggesting that you go see this movie. But I do recommend that you go back and read the 21st chapter of Luke's Gospel, from which today's Gospel lesson was taken.

It begins with Jesus derision of the rich and powerful; and continues with his high praise for some poor widow who dropped a couple of mites as an offering. Shaming the religious movers and shakers—people like us—was bad enough.

But then Jesus began predicting that the Temple—the very center of faith for the Jewish people, the sturdy, holy and spectacular place for God's presence on earth—Jesus began predicting that it was coming down...again.

The Temple already had been destroyed once, but King Herod had recently overseen its reconstruction so that it was even bigger and better than before. And then some insignificant rabbi from Nazareth named Jesus showed the nerve to predict its destruction all over again!

Imagine if the twin towers were rebuilt, bigger and better than before. Now imagine walking in the courtyard just outside the front doors and shouting that they would fall again, not one stone left upon another.

You and I know that even in this free and democratic country, there are very good odds that you would be arrested, accused of being a terrorist, imprisoned, and perhaps—like Jesus—facing a trial in which capital punishment was one of the possible outcomes.

This is more or less the chain of events you will read about in chapter 21 of the Gospel according to Luke. The characters are familiar: the Chief priests, the disciples, Judas, and of course Jesus standing in the center of all that swirling chaos, warning his friends that things were going to get rough.

Jesus was trying to tell his closest friends that it was the beginning of the end for the old world order with Gentiles (like Caesar and Pilate) parading as kings. Jesus knew that in this kind of upheaval with so much power and money at stake, truth-tellers would be among the first casualties, and Jesus was certainly a truth-teller.

Jesus asks those who follow him to be alert, and pray for the strength to stand with him. God knows it is not easy to speak truth to power, and thank God we are not called to do this alone. We have been given one like us, the Son of Man, the Son of Joseph and Mary. He was born in the midst of crisis and calamity, on the run with his refugee family from bloodthirsty, King Herod; who *may have rebuilt the Temple*; but *who also murdered innocent children* because of rumors about a rival, newborn king.

Yes, we have been given one like us, the Son of Man, with human hands and a human heart and a human touch so that we don't have to stand alone in the midst of calamity and crisis, in the midst of evil forces which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God."²

Near the end of the movie—2012—two of the world leaders choose *not* to be rescued along with thousands of other privileged and powerful people; but rather to stand with the hopeless who faced certain death, to tell them

² From the Renunciations in Holy Baptism, *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 303.

the truth about their situation, and to give them a chance to say and do important things, like mending broken relationships.

It is clear that these powerful leaders could stand with the hopeless because they believed that they did not stand alone, but with the one whose kingdom would have no end.³

In just a moment we will say what we believe in the words of the Nicene Creed. In the year 325 A.D. the Church was having a terrible argument about Jesus. A group of bishops, priests, deacons and lay people came together to decide what they believed.

One of the things some of their parents and grandparents and great grand parents had believed is that it was the beginning of the end under the violent persecution of Christians by the Roman Empire.

1700 years later, there are still signs that point to danger and fear. Just like then, there are still signs that even seem to point to the beginning of the end.

Although the people who wrote the Nicene Creed were trying to settle a terrible argument, what they gave us is some language that *still* reminds us that we do not stand alone in this world, even at our lowest points of suffering and death, when it just might seem like the beginning of the end.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ...He came down from heaven...He became incarnate from the Virgin Mary...He suffered death and was buried.⁴

Moreover, the people who wrote the Nicene Creed also gave us some language that reminds us that suffering and death are not the final word.

We believe that he will come again...and *his* kingdom will have no end.⁵

In the words of Eucharistic Prayer B, which we begin to pray again in this Season of Advent, we thank God, that “you have made us worthy to stand before you.”⁶ At least part of what we are saying when we stand together—in this congregation, and with sisters and brothers in Christ’s Body around the world—part of what we are saying is that we don’t stand alone.

We stand with Jesus—the Son of God, who is also the Son of Man. We stand with Jesus when we call him Lord, and when we call on his name in our prayers. We stand with Jesus when we seek his truth with our minds, and when we strive for his justice with our hands and our hearts. We stand with Jesus when we come forward to be fed by his presence among us in the Holy Eucharist.

By him and with him and in him⁷, we can stand in the face of danger and fear, even when it might seem like the beginning of the end.

By him and with him and in him⁸, we can begin a new year with hope and joy, because we do not stand alone, but as citizens of his kingdom, and his kingdom will have no end.⁹
Amen.

³ This reference to the “kingdom that will have no end” is taken from the Nicene Creed, *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 359.

⁴ These references are taken from the Nicene Creed, *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 358.

⁵ *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 359.

⁶ From Holy Eucharist, Rite II, *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 368.

⁷ This phrase is taken from the doxology of Eucharistic Prayer B, *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 369.

⁸ *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 369.

⁹ *Book of Common Prayer*, p. 359.