



First Sunday in Advent

Sermon by Revd Alison Thabethe



Sunday 28 November 2021

READINGS

Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36

The Promise of Advent

Happy New Year. Yes I know it's the end of November, but today marks the start of the new cycle in the church year. It is the first Sunday of Advent – the season of waiting.

Advent means coming or arriving – and it is the coming of Christ that we anticipate in this season. Firstly of course we are waiting for Christmas when we celebrate the birth of Jesus. It is what some have called Part One in God's plan for the redemption of the world. But our gospel reading today is not about a baby being born. It speaks of Jesus' return in glory, which many people refer to as the Second Coming of Christ. The feeling we might experience during Advent could be like waiting for the release of Season Two of your favourite Netflix series. Do you know the Christmas song about waiting for Santa at Christmas? It goes: You'd better watch out, you'd better not cry, you'd better not pout I'm telling you why, Santa Claus is coming to town. This song captures excitement and anticipation, mixed with a bit of anxiety and even a threat. Watch out! Santa is checking his naughty list! Well, each year, the season of Advent begins in a similar way.

Week One draws us to attention with a gospel passage that is usually described as apocalyptic. When we hear the word "apocalypse" we tend to think of turmoil, devastation, and a chaotic end of the world. But the word actually means "revelation". I'm sure you can see the connection. Our apocalyptic Bible passages are here to reveal to us something that we may not have seen and this revelation is more mysterious than it appears on the surface. In the apocalyptic passages in the gospels, the writers take the familiar cultural imagery of the time to convey the significance of Jesus' message. In Luke's gospel we read that the heavenly bodies will be shaken. There will be signs in the sky. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexed at the roaring and tossing of the sea. There will be war and strife.

It is understandable why, every few years, someone predicts a date for the end of the world. It is not difficult to think that these are the end times right now, as if this were a direct prediction. We must remember, however, that those who wrote the gospels and the epistles to the early church, and those who compiled the writings in the Bible held the same beliefs in the immanent coming of Christ and the end of this world. At that time, most people believed that events in the night sky, where human beings have no control, reflected coming events on earth. We don't need to even look at the skies. We hear apocalyptic talk of "the end" of something safe and familiar all around us.

Right here in South Africa, you hear people saying “The writing is on the wall,” from the broken roads to Eskom’s stage four load shedding, or recently Jo’burg’s water crisis, or everyone’s opinion on the fate of our new municipal coalitions that seem about as sturdy as a house of cards. Globally we have just seen the 26th United Nations Climate Change Summit in Glasgow, with very little effective change. World leaders and billionaires ironically arrived at the summit in 115 private jets, each adding about 11 tonnes of CO2 to their carbon footprint.

I could go on, but I think there is enough for us to feel weighed down as recorded in the passage from Luke. The signs of the times are pretty overwhelming. Why do we enter the new church year of Advent in this way? When Jesus was born, for hundreds of years, God’s people had been waiting for a promised Messiah. Longing for a saviour, desperate for the unfolding of God’s plan. So too, we are awakened to our own need for justice, for healing and for redemption, not just for ourselves but for all people and indeed the whole of creation. We begin the year by being called to attention.

One of the repeated refrains in this time of Advent is the cry “How long, Oh Lord? How long?” We need to ask ourselves, “What are we waiting for?” Well, if we are inward-focused and self-satisfied and very comfortable, then the answer is ... nothing. We can start the season by opening our eyes to what lies around us and by awakening our hearts to their deepest longings. We need to call out to God on behalf of ourselves and of one another, to prepare ourselves for the magnitude of what, and Who, is to come. Not only to remember and celebrate the Christ who has already come to us, but also to anticipate and look toward the fullness of time when, through Christ, God will bring about the redemption of the world.

The imagery used in the passage from Luke should not be read as a set of clues to the schedule of the coming end. It probably has more to do with a reminder of humankind’s vulnerability. The Second Coming is not a deadline, necessarily. It is rather an invitation to live in a particular way in the present time. In our despair and our inadequacy, we must not succumb to fatalism and negativity. We must not let go of the thread of hope woven throughout history as seen in our scripture readings. Advent is anticipation. The prophecy from the book of Jeremiah which is one of the set readings for this Sunday proclaims God’s words: “The days are coming when I will fulfill the promise. .. I will raise up a just shoot. ... He shall do what is right and just in the land. In those days Judah shall be safe and Jerusalem secure.” These words were true for the Jews who were captive in Babylon and who lived to see their freedom almost 600 years before Jesus’ birth. They were words of promise based on generations of experience of God’s faithfulness.

In Luke’s gospel, the parable of “the fig tree and all the trees” is a reference that suggests that the past is one way to help us make sense of the future. When we see the new buds forming on bare winter branches, we know that summer will arrive. Why? Because we have previously lived through a change of seasons. It is the same with the patterns and cycles of the church year, teaching us, forming us, and preparing us. Advent is about promise. Jesus urges the crowds, “Stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” How should we face this time? Filled with hope.

Poet and pastor Jan Richardson wrote this response to today’s gospel passage: “He calls us in each day and moment to do the things that will stir up our courage and keep us grounded in God, not only that we may perceive Christ when he comes, but also that we may recognize him even now.” Richardson continues by saying, “Amid the destruction and devastation that are ever taking place in the world, Christ beckons us to perceive and to participate in the ways that he is already seeking to bring redemption and healing for the whole of creation.”

We need to pay attention. Not because of a future event, but because of a present way of living shaped by the presence of Jesus, both now and in ways that are “not yet”. Advent is not about waiting on the edge of our seats for God’s coming rescue or for divine punishment. It is a time of invitation to be mindful here and now. We need to learn the signs of how God is working out God’s redemption in us, and then do whatever we are able to participate in that.

In this season, the colour purple reminds us of anticipation, preparation and repentance. Just as in the time of Lent, before Easter, we might like to spend extra time in prayer and study to listen for God’s call to us. We might want to begin a new spiritual practice. We can ask ourselves what habits are helpful for us. What practices keep us centred on God and help us to recognise the presence of Christ in this world? How do we transform those conversations of doom and gloom and predictions of the end into genuine declarations of hope? How does this prepare us for action, that we can participate with God in acts of redemption, to embody the Good News for creation, for the environment, for our city and our community and for one another?

It starts with a call to attention. Lift up your heads. What is it that you long for in these Advent days?