

“Waiting and Watching”

Psalm 25:1-10; Luke 21:25-36 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – November 28, 2021
First Sunday of Advent

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might wait and watch with faithful trust and hope. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Welcome to Advent! Our problem may have been solved! Well, not our main problem, but the problem of Advent, which may not be a problem you even realized we had, but let me explain. There has long been a tension between what liturgical theologians believe Advent should be and what ordinary people in churches want Advent to be. It's a season of preparation, right? That part we agree on. But the liturgical theologians want us to realize that at least part of what we're preparing for – if not the main thing – is the Second Coming of Christ, that is, the apocalypse. But mostly, the rest of us prefer to be preparing for Christmas. So when the lectionary offers us these scriptures about “signs” and “portents” and keeping alert, there can be a bit of a disconnect.

That disconnect goes beyond Advent though. There is a fundamental difference between us – Christians in 2021 – and the people the gospels were originally written for: they were really and truly expecting Jesus to return at any moment. Some of them had only missed him by a few years; some of them maybe a few decades. Maybe there were even some who had vague memories of him.

Regardless, they knew he was coming back very soon. Like soon in the sense of, I'm not going to make any major life decisions or changes, because Jesus will be here momentarily. You know how when someone says they're almost ready to go to the store together, and you ask if they mean "almost ready" like I have time to go to the bathroom first or "almost ready" like it's okay to start another chapter? Jesus was coming soon enough that you'd better hurry in the bathroom. Because one more chapter leads to another, and next thing you know, you've missed the Apocalypse.

This "any moment now" orientation to life is really hard to imagine, as third millennium Christians. It seems obvious to us that Jesus didn't come in those folks' lifetime, nor in any of the 19 centuries following. So it's hard to work up a sense of urgency. And yet, I wonder if this year, in particular, if we might have more emotional connection to the spiritual orientation of those early Christians than we ever have before. Can we imagine what it's like to wait for something we're convinced is coming, but it keeps not coming? Can we imagine what it's like to watch for signs of the thing that's supposed to be coming, examining every shift in our society to see what portents it holds for the future? Normally, I think our answer would be No. But in 2021, that's actually sort of what we're all doing. We believe the pandemic will end. We long for the pandemic to end. We know it will end, and we've been praying for months that it will end soon. But it's not ending yet. We assumed back in May (2020 and 2021!) that things would be more or less normal by now. Instead we have news of a new "variant of concern."

So in some ways, the apocalyptic passages of scripture are finally relevant to our lives. (You have to wonder what kind of omen that is, right?) You've heard me say before that this pandemic has, in some ways, been an apocalypse. The word "apocalypse" means "revealing," and the pandemic has revealed a lot. It showed us how fragile our economic systems are and how inequitable; it showed us both how connected we are to people around the world that we'll never meet and just how desperate isolation can make us. It showed us that we can be church without ever breathing the same air, and that the Spirit that comes alive when we gather is not to be taken for granted. I don't know about you, but I pretty much feel like I had learned these lessons by this time last year, and I didn't really need another year of practice. At this point, I think a lot of us are just really weary. Important things were revealed, but there's not much left to muse upon; the novelty has worn off. We just want to be done. But we're not.

So what can we learn from these early Christians, who had a firm expectation that was not being met, year after year? Can they show us a way to hope? Jesus talks about a fig tree, as if the Second Coming was as reliable as the seasons. Living in a time when the climate crisis has made even the seasons go haywire, perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that it's not that easy. But there are some hints of hope in here, if we don't confuse hope with mere optimism. Those signs Jesus warns them about – in the sun and the moon and the stars, nations in disarray, people fainting with foreboding – we've got those, right? And honestly, what age hasn't had such

signs over the past 2000 years? So are the signs meaningless? Or can they, as Jesus implies, remind us that “the kingdom of God is near”? What if that is the most important message those signs are giving?

“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away,” says Jesus. And how many empires have come and gone? The Roman Empire, the Holy Roman Empire, the Aztec Empire, the Ming Dynasty, the Ottoman Empire, the crumbling British Empire... the world as humanity knew it has ended and been rebuilt countless times, but these words are still with us, reminding us that the kingdom of God is near.

And did you hear what Jesus said to do, when the signs all around us indicate the kingdom of God is near? “Stand up and raise your heads,” he said. What if we are discovering, as those early Christians were, that it’s not a moment in which we’re asked to stand up and raise our heads, but a lifetime? It’s not merely an action, but a way of living. Our waiting and watching is not something we accomplish in an afternoon, but rather a way of being in the world. When the psalmist says, “For you I wait all day long,” they don’t mean one day; they mean every day.

“All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness,” says the psalm. What if that is what it means to stand up and raise our heads? The signs are all around us; we are being called to live as though the kingdom of God is near. When inequity is revealed, we are called to work for God’s justice. When we’re tempted to let down our guard and pretend things are fine, Jesus calls us to “be alert.” The thing

we long for hasn't appeared on the horizon yet; it is tarrying, to use a biblical word. "If it tarryes, wait for it," the Bible tells us. How do we maintain hope in the face of that tarrying? How do we stave off fear and foreboding?

"Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love," the psalm implores. I would argue it's not God who needs the reminder. We are not called to a moment of apocalypse, but to a lifetime of being alert to the presence of the kingdom of God, in the midst of disarray and confusion. The paths God has called us to are "steadfast love and faithfulness." I would argue this is why we get together every week, because we can revive our hope by witnessing one another's faithfulness and love. We may not be able to do much more than tread water, 20 months into this pandemic. But if we can tread water with love and faithfulness, it will be enough. Our breath – which is to say, our hope – will not fail, if we can continue to hold one another up. If we can continue to help each other believe that all the signs and portents around us, good and bad, are reminders that God is near, hope will not be lost. It may not be the shimmering, lovely hope we've aimed for in Advents past. But a steely hope, a tedious, every day hope, one that sustains us when we're struggling to keep our heads above water, is just as good, if not more precious. "All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness." These "words will not pass away." Much has been revealed. We are called to make clear that the signs and revelations of our day, too, show that God is near. Hallelujah and Amen.