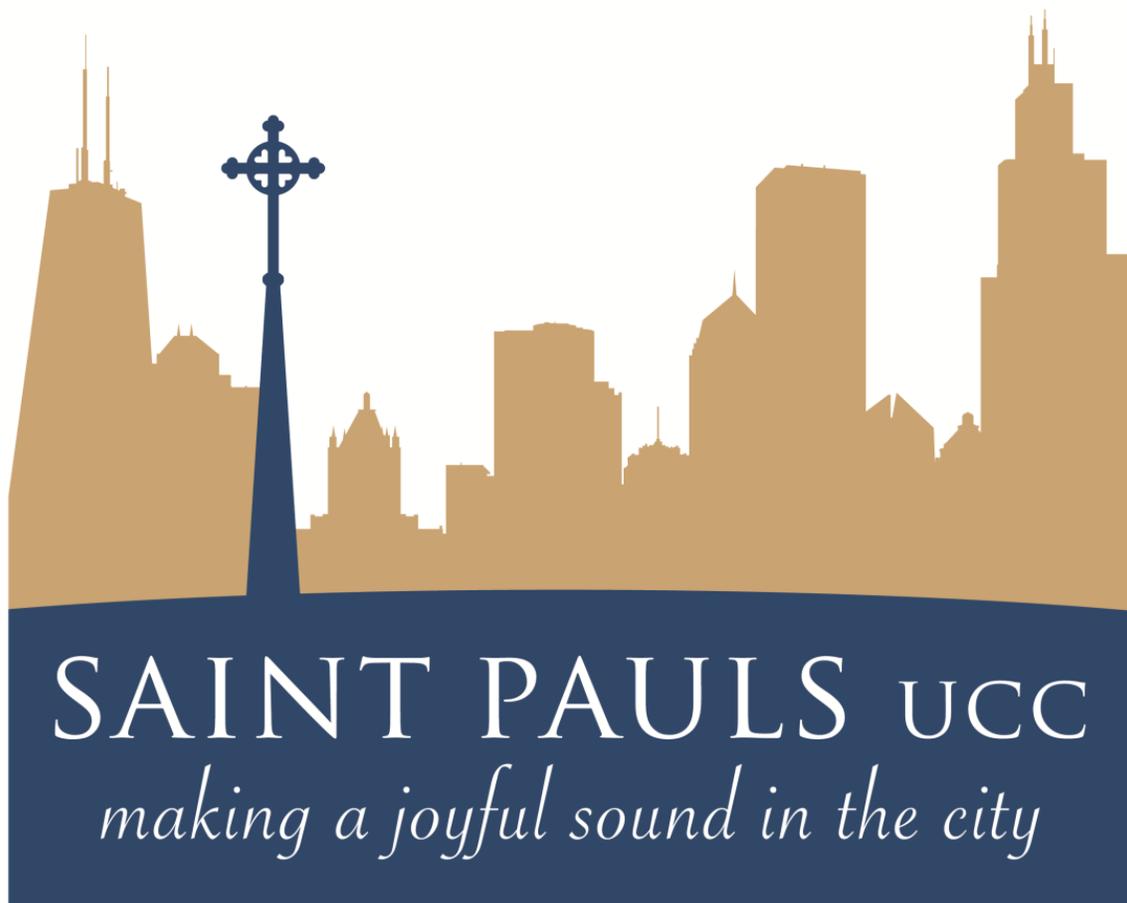


Heads Up

Sunday Sermon by Jeff Carlson
First Sunday of Advent - December 2, 2018



A Sermon from
St Pauls United Church of Christ

Luke 21:25-36

“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and 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, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

Then Jesus told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

What a heart-warming and cheerful bit of scripture for the first Sunday of Advent! We hear Jesus, like he does on this Sunday every year, describe a world that is gripped by fear. Anxious. Noisy. Confused. Creation in chaos. Terrified of what’s next. Sounds like he’s talking about us. And then he describes how the world copes with all of that chaos – getting drunk, self-medication, denial, mindless numbing distraction. Now he’s really talking about us. “This generation will not pass away until all of this happens.” This generation. Our generation. Every generation.

We forget that the season of Advent begins in pain. We forget, because we do as much as we can to cover our pain. In our world, Advent has become a season of cocktail parties, over-eating and over-spending – all of those behaviors that we hope will help us to cope.

O come, O come, Emmanuel is a cry of deep, deep longing from a place of pain. Captive Israel, exiled in Babylon, singing the song of the prophet Isaiah, longing for a Messiah, longing for home. And then 500 years later, Mary, unwed, pregnant, poor, a nobody Jew living under Roman occupation. She also sings a song - her Magnificat, longing for God to turn the world upside down. Jesus's mom was a revolutionary. You can read all about her radical politics in Luke chapter 1. Advent begins among people who are in pain, fed up with the way the world is being run, longing for deliverance - a Prince of Peace, an end to the violence, the exploitation, the greed, the suffering, people who long for God to make things right in the world. Advent is deeply subversive of the powers that be.

And whoever is in power knows the threat of Advent. Do you know what happened to Isaiah the prophet? He was sawn in two in order to keep him from prophesying change. Herod massacred children in order to prevent a regime change.

Our American culture does an incredibly efficient job of silencing the hope of Advent through the anesthesia of nostalgia and shopping. And so we should not be surprised that the president of the United States refuses to hold a powerful despot accountable for an assassination because doing so might cost America some money. Mary, on the other hand, the mother of Jesus, sings of a God who casts the powerful from their thrones and sends the rich away empty. Mary had hope.

Matt knew what today's Gospel reading was and he pointed me toward a comment he read on Twitter. It perfectly expresses the meaning of today's text. It's from Pastor Lenny Duncan. I'd never heard of him. He's the pastor of a black, open and affirming Lutheran congregation in Brooklyn, NY. Imagining that. The last Lutheran church I was at was named after St. Olaf and was full of North Dakota Norwegians. Maybe that's why Reverend Duncan has a book coming out next year called: *Dear Church, A Love Letter to the Whitest Denomination in America*. Pastor Duncan gets together with a group of other pastors each week to discuss the upcoming lectionary texts and he Tweeted on Wednesday: "I was at my local pastors' 'text study' yesterday and when Luke 21:25-36 came up I was so excited. So I was asked by a peer, 'Why? Why do you love this text?' I replied, 'As an oppressed person, as a black man, the destruction of the systems of this world are the gospel.'"

He's right. Advent announces the destruction of the systems of this world and that is good news and that is why, in solidarity with everyone living under oppression, today we light the candle of hope. And we wait to hear those words once again: "Unto us a child is born. Unto us a son is given and the government shall be upon his shoulders." We wait to hear, "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is the Messiah, the Lord." We wait to sing again with the angels, "Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled, because joy to the world the Lord has come, let earth receive her king!"

Advent is for people who are fully aware of what's wrong with the world and who are awake with hope for the day when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.

What is Christian hope?

Two years ago today I preached on the first Sunday of Advent, and I talked about how Joe had moved to Honolulu three months earlier. I said that I was trying to live expectantly for his return, waiting for the second coming of Joe – making the bed, doing the dishes, keeping things ready as if he might walk through the door and come home at any moment.

It's two years later and I still keep making the bed—well, most days. But this exile is getting old and it shows no immediate prospect of ending. We're still waiting. In these two years we've learned a great deal about longing and grief. And I hope and pray earnestly every day for the exile to end. And that's a hope that anyone in our situation would hang onto. It's a very human hope, good hope, but that's not what Christian hope in Advent is about.

Advent hope isn't about a particular chain of events: like Joe gets a job back in Chicago, moves home, and we live happily ever after. Christian hope isn't focused on an event – like finding a spouse, a new job, a new President. Christian hope isn't ultimately even about going to heaven when you die.

Christian hope is focused intently upon God, and in particular the Kingdom of God coming to earth. That's the hope that Jesus taught us to pray for and that we say every Sunday: thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Heaven on earth. That's what we're waiting for and hoping for. We inherited that hope from our older brothers and sisters, the Jews.

The difference is that while they still await the Messiah, we believe the Messiah was born in Jesus Christ and in him the Kingdom of God has come near and is still coming near. He is the one who was and is and is to come.

The Kingdom of God is always at hand, it's always near, because Christ is always near. He is always coming to us. And he is especially close to people who are in pain and longing for relief. And so we hear Christ say, "Lift up your heads. The Kingdom of God is near."

How do we receive the Kingdom of God? Jesus told his disciples that those who wish to enter the Kingdom of God must become like little children.

What does that mean? How do we become like little children? Those of us who are grown-ups, middle-aged or old aged. How do we enter the Kingdom of God as children?

Children embody hope. Their future is open. Children are full of promise. "Unto us a child is born. Unto us a daughter is given." Children love to make-believe. They love to imagine that a different world is possible and to live as if that imaginary world were already here – magical kingdoms of fairy princesses, magical kingdoms where heroes can fly.

To become like little children is to be open to God's dream for the world. Open to new life. Open to change. Hands stretched out to receive the gift-wrapped package that is waiting for each of you under the Tree of Life.

If you go to Rome and visit the Catacombs of Calixtus along the Appian Way, you can see the place where ancient, persecuted Christians used to secretly bury their dead. On the catacomb walls they painted frescoes that are some of our earliest Christian art. Some of those paintings are of people praying; but their heads are not bowed down. Their hands are not folded. Our ancient Christian ancestors prayed standing on their feet, hands lifted up, heads raised, like little children eagerly expecting to receive a gift from God.

Do we really want to see the Kingdom of God come, or are we simply satisfied and cynical, with the way things are? Jesus said: no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born again. If we want to see the Kingdom of God, then we must become like little children, born again, with new eyes – born into the new kingdom that was born with the Christ child.

But the Kingdom of God isn't a make-believe, fairy-tale realm. In the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ we have seen that it is real. It's a kingdom of justice, where every life is cherished and everyone has enough. A kingdom where people matter more than money. It's a kingdom that refuses to rule with violence, but with healing love. And it's a kingdom where the only people who are on the outside are there by choice, because the Kingdom of God has no border guards and no security walls.

Isaiah could see that Kingdom coming. He could imagine it – and so he sang, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” Mary could see that Kingdom coming. She could imagine it - and so she sang magnificat anima mea: my soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God, my savior.

Can you see the Kingdom of God? Can you imagine it? If you can't, then you must be born again. Lift up your head toward the coming Christ. Open your eyes with the hopeful imagination of a little child, and live as if the world that God imagines is already here.

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