

Advent has arrived. The first week of Advent is when we’re supposed to deal with the shock of it all. Is it time? Already? Sure, the world has been giving Christmas hints for months, but it still seems to surprise us every year. Perhaps it is because in church we don’t start with the Christmas story. That would be a little more familiar. But no, we start with the warning signs, with the forecast of stormy skies ahead. We start with a prophetic call to look at the world we inhabit. How close are we to the kingdom we proclaim? How close are we to this coming “on earth as it is in heaven” for which we pray week after week? Advent is about being honest. But not hopeless. Advent is about the joy of longing for home—the kind of home that will complete us, the kind of home that will transform us, as well as the whole world. Today is about helping us remember that we have a mission and a hope.

For Luke, the writer of this gospel, “as it was in the beginning” might be a good slogan to encapsulate his gospel. Because when Luke began his account, we heard a lot of dramatic rhetoric as to what the coming of the Messiah would entail. Even the Virgin Mary’s song in Luke 1—the Magnificat—is filled with violent imagery. We read about the rich being sent away empty, about the proud being overthrown, and just generally about the great reversal of fortune that would come as a result of the child Mary was carrying.

Then when John the Baptist appears in Luke 3, he too makes claims that are somewhat grand. He predicts great upheavals and then claims that ALL of humanity would see these things. His words to the religious leaders of the day were laced with bracing imagery of axes being laid to roots and such. Both Mary and John the Baptist speak (and sing) in ways that let you know something BIG is on its way!

But then Jesus of Nazareth appears and for the longest time things get sort of quiet. Jesus is doing many good things, saying memorable phrases, healing people in need. But no valleys were exulted. No mountains were falling into

the heart of the sea. The haughty rich were snug and secure in their mansions, and the poor were not being filled with good things. It got to the point where even John the Baptist thought he had made a mistake in identifying his cousin Jesus as the great Coming One and so chapter 7 says he dispatched a cadre of his followers to ask a heartbreaking question of Jesus: “*Are you the one who was to come or should we wait for someone else?*” Loosely paraphrased, John is wondering if someone better was coming!

But Jesus kept making clear that his kingdom, though real and powerful, was of a different nature than the kingdoms of this world. Finally, by the time we get to Luke 21, some of the gospel’s earlier rhetoric appears to have come full circle as even Jesus starts to talk about public events that all humanity will see. What’s more, those public events will be dramatic and will send people scattering in anguish and perplexed by these events. You can almost hear John the Baptist say, “Well, now that’s more like it!”

It’s easy to latch onto this kind of dramatic stuff from either end of Luke’s gospel and make it the whole story. But it would be wrong to treat Jesus’ quieter gospel ministry as a kind of footnote, or exception. Hence some Bible readers make the “norm” of the church’s ministry the loud and noisy and public stuff. But that is, of course, a mistake. We cannot ignore the example of Jesus all through the gospel nor may we forget that even after his resurrection, we find Jesus not engaged in violent actions against the rich and powerful but trudging along beside two clueless travelers on route to Emmaus or appearing in locked rooms, or on a quiet and remote mountaintop just before ascending into the clouds.

Jesus says that when all these big things happen, the end is near, the kingdom is near. But he implies that until this happens—and it certainly looks to be a an unmistakable set of circumstances when the end finally comes—things will probably continue along the kingdom trajectory suggested by the bulk of Jesus’ earthly ministry. We are to continue to witness to Christ and his kingdom in Christ-like ways, which is to say in ways that keep an eye out for the

downtrodden, the poor, the forgotten. And as we do, we will likely continue to do this work out of the public eye, even as Jesus did.

Over the long haul, this can get a little discouraging. And Jesus knows it. Why else did he conclude with such a stern warning to be vigilant and be on the watch? Jesus knew we'd grow lax and complacent in case we peg our identity—or try to define our successes—largely by the terms and definitions of the world (which tends to define success as anything that is loud, garish, glitzy, headline-grabbing, and so forth).

Paul Scott Wilson, in *The Lectionary Commentary*, notes that when Jesus uses the word *ethnos* to describe the “nations” that will be in anguish and perplexity, he’s using the same word he uses for “Gentiles” in verse 24. The sense is that upheaval over the “signs,” as well as their implications, will be universal. By implication, however, Wilson suggests, the Gentiles may not recognize those signs. Fred Craddock, in his Luke commentary, points out that the word Jesus uses for “this generation” in verse 32, can refer, as we’d expect, to a period of about 30-40 years. But it can also refer to an indefinite number of years that’s marked by a distinct quality of suffering, waiting or witnessing.

Mary and John the Baptist at the beginning of Luke—and Jesus himself here in Luke 21 near the end of Luke—were not wrong. The kingdom is going to make all the difference in the world. It will be God’s grand reversal of fortunes, God’s glorious return of his creation to what he intended from the beginning. But it may be a while. Meanwhile *simple faithfulness* is called for and gospel “success” is defined by those times we notice the little people, the down-and-outers, the sick and marginalized and proclaim to them the Good News. It may not grab headlines—and in a world beset by the multitude of problems that we have, it may look like the equivalent of trying to empty the ocean one thimble-full at a time. However, the vision of God’s kingdom views things differently!

I suppose it’s this way every year but today, late in the year 2021, it looks as though we will be celebrating Advent and Christmas under the shadow of a

persistent pandemic, economic uncertainty and even deeper and sharper political and social divisions, if you can hardly believe that is possible. As I speak these words, I have no idea what other terrible things might transpire between now and the evening when we celebrate the fulfillment of God's prophetic promise on Christmas Eve.

I'd say it may be an Advent to test what we really believe. The nations are in tumult and respond the only way they mostly know how: meeting fire with fire. Yet we in the church believe that the kingdom of God is the greater reality, even this very moment. We believe that the kingdom is spreading like yeast in dough, like a seed germinating and sending down roots silently in the soil. We believe Jesus HAS come once and WILL come again; and all that we do—how we pray, how we worship, how we witness, especially in times of fear and tumult—demonstrates our ardent belief in the power of Jesus to save us all.

In some ways, given the news of the day, it may not feel like a very "Merry" Christmas this year and that traditional greeting may even stick in our throats a bit, feeling more like an effort to cover over the mayhem that is so prevalent than a genuine expression of gladness from our hearts. But then, "Merry Christmas" has never been a Christian, biblical saying anyway. We seek the deeper things of joy, not mere happiness. We seek to celebrate the coming of God's *shalom* and the incarnation of God's *grace* that alone can save us from our sins and this world from its addiction to evil and violence. We seek something more profound than that which is "merry." And thankfully through the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, we have that something.

In a wonderful book entitled *Standing on the Promises*, Lewis Smedes says that hoping for others is hard, but not the hardest. Praying for others is hard, but not the hardest. The hardest part for people who believe in the second coming of Jesus Christ is in "living the sort of life that makes people say, 'Ah, so that's how people are going to live when righteousness takes over our world.'"

The hardest part is *simple faithfulness* in our work and in our attitudes—the kind of faithfulness that shows we are being drawn forward by the magnetic force of the Kingdom of God. According to a story that Os Guinness tells, two hundred twenty-six years ago the Connecticut House of Representatives was in session on a bright day in May, and the delegates were able to do their work by natural light. But then something happened that nobody expected. Right in the middle of debate, the day turned to night. Clouds obliterated the sun, and everything turned to darkness. Some legislators thought it was the Second Coming. So a clamor arose. People wanted to adjourn. People wanted to pray. People wanted to prepare for the coming of the Lord. But the speaker of the House had a different idea. He was a Christian believer, and he rose to the occasion with good sense and good faith. “We are all upset by the darkness,” he said, “and some of us are afraid. But, the Day of the Lord is either approaching or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for adjournment. And if the Lord is returning, I, for one, choose to be found doing my duty. Therefore, I ask that candles be brought.” And men of the legislature who trusted in Jesus went back to their desks and resumed their debate.

Jesus’ words are an antidote to our worldly cynicism. Jesus’ words are meant to raise our heads and raise our hopes. Could justice really come to the earth? Could domestic violence come to an end, and could victims of such violence quit blaming themselves? Could Democrats and Republicans look into each other’s eyes and see a brother or a sister? Could some of us who struggle with addictions, or with diseases that trap us, be liberated by God and begin to walk taller in the Kingdom of God? Could Jesus Christ the Messiah appear among us in a way that our minds could never imagine, to erase our smug confidence about where we ought to draw the lines of reality?

If we believe in the Kingdom of God we will *pray*, and we will *hope* for those without much hope left. And one more thing, a fairly tough thing: We will *work* in the same direction as we pray and hope.

It will require our *simple faithfulness!* Amen.