**Preaching Notes for the First Sunday of Advent, Year C (November 29)**

The Rev. Dr. Dawn Chesser

[**Luke 21:25-36**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=95#gospel_reading)

I remember vividly when I first started working with a worship design team to plan worship at a wonderful church in the suburbs of Chicago that several members of the team were surprised at the lectionary readings for Advent. I recall one person in particular exclaiming, “Why are we reading about destruction and death? It’s almost Christmas! We should be reading about the joy of the coming birth of baby Jesus!” I responded, “Well, readings about the end times always appear at the start of Advent, because we are preparing the way not just for the birth of the baby, but for the second coming.” And this woman said, “What? I’ve been in church all my life, and I’ve never heard such a thing!”

I suppose I shouldn’t have been surprised. Since so many churches no longer follow the lectionary, opting instead to develop an Advent Series around a theme that likely does not point to the eschatological dimensions of Christmas, I should have known that the ancient tradition of reading stories of the end of the world as preparation for Christmas would fall by the wayside.

If you are reading this, then you have probably had a similar experience because you follow the lectionary. I personally appreciate the countercultural message the church offers as a way of preparing for Christmas. Instead of encouraging us to prepare for the celebration of Christ’s birth by decorating, throwing parties and spending lavishly in order to shower our friends and family with gifts (as if it is their birthday), the tradition of the church invites us into a period of self-examination and penance. It is the opposite of what the world tells us to do. It is countercultural in the highest order.

During the season of Advent, the Gospel reading is always primary; and the Old Testament, Psalm, and Epistle readings all support or supplement the Gospel message. So in this season, my notes will focus on the Gospel reading; and instead of offering full notes on the other lessons, I will suggest ways you might incorporate those readings into the message, if you so choose.

The Advent season gets off to a roaring start with a dire prophecy about the end times:

“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 heaven 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” (Luke 21:25-28, NRSV).

This prediction is illustrated by a story and then a call upon the hearers to prepare for the coming judgment:

“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” (Luke 21: 34-36, NRSV).

In other words, we are to prepare for the birth of Jesus into the world and for his coming again by living as people who are prepared to die.

It’s not a very Christmassy sentiment. But it is vital that we offer an alternative to what the world offers in preparation for the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ into this world and his coming again.

Recently, I was visiting a family member and we had a lengthy discussion about death. This person is very focused on fitness and healthy living. She was expressing her concern that perhaps the lifestyle of another family member was not only causing her health problems, but perhaps even hastening her death. I said to her (in a rather snarky tone, I’m afraid) that no matter how healthy we are, the fact is we are all going to die. It is unavoidable. I added that I hope to die before my body gets to a point where I can’t really live.

Some of my response came as a result of my own situation. My mother suffers from dementia, a condition that runs in my family. Other than her problems with memory, my mom is in great physical shape. She is not overweight. She eats well. She and my dad go to the gym and exercise every weekday. She takes appropriate medication to deal with high blood pressure and to slow the progress of her dementia; but for an eighty-year-old woman, she is amazingly healthy and stands to live for many more years. My greatest fear is that her excellent physical condition is going to keep her alive beyond the time that she can engage fully in life and be in relationship and communication with the people she loves.

Don’t get me wrong. I don’t want my mom to die, ever. And I don’t want to die either. But there is nothing we can do about it. My mom is going to die, and so am I, and so is every other human being who is alive today. Tens of thousands of people are dying right this very minute, even as I write these words. Many more will die before the sun goes down today. Human life is fragile and brief in the grand scheme of things.

Many people, when they read passages like this one from Luke, imagine a day when the world and all life upon it draws to a dramatic, sudden, and violent close. They look for signs in the world that signal that the time is coming and try to prepare for it by praying and sharing about the saving power of Christ with others. In this theological worldview, when the end comes, people will be lined up before the Lord to be judged. Those who confess Jesus Christ as their Savior will immediately be saved for eternal life in heaven, and those who do not will be left behind to go down with the ship.

Whether or not it happens like that doesn’t really matter much to me.

What I do believe is that each of us will one day find ourselves standing before the Lord. I do believe he is coming in a cloud with power and great glory to each and every one of us. And I believe he will welcome every one of us into his kingdom with grace and mercy and gather us around his table to feast at the heavenly banquet with all the saints that have gone before us.

When is he coming? I don’t know. It might be in the next hour. It might be before the sun goes down today. It might be next week, or next year, or thirty or forty years from now. We have no way of knowing.

* What we do have is the ability to prepare ourselves for that day by examining our lives and repenting and turning away from those things that are not life-giving.
* What we do have is the chance to live whatever time we have left on this earth in the ways that Jesus came into this world to teach us.
* What we do have is the opportunity to participate in the healing of the world.
* What we do have is the prospect of offering the hope, peace, joy, and love that Jesus was born into this world to share.
* What we do have is the promise of everlasting life.

[**Jeremiah 33:14-16**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=95#hebrew_reading)

The reading from Jeremiah reminds us that God is faithful, even when humans are not. Therefore, when God promises restoration to the house of Israel, we can trust in that promise. God will bring dead bones back to life and new life out of what appears to be a dead and lifeless stump.

As the *Book of Common Prayer* quote based on an older French saying reads, “In the midst of life we are in death:  of whom may we seek for succour, but of thee, O Lord, who for our sins art justly displeased? Yet, O Lord God most holy, O Lord most mighty, O holy and most merciful Saviour, deliver us not into the bitter pains of eternal death.”

Even though the prophet was not writing about Jesus, as his disciples, we believe that Jesus was and is the righteous branch that sprang from David. Jesus is the one who executes justice and righteousness in the land. Jesus is the one who saves us and allows us to live with security, peace, and joy, even when times become difficult and it feels as if the world around us is crumbling. Life in Christ is the ground of our hope and the promise of our salvation.

[**1 Thessalonians 3:9-13**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=95#epistle_reading)

My suggestion is that you close your sermon with a prayer based on the one Paul offers for the church in Thessalonica:

Gracious God, with our brother Paul we offer prayers of thanksgiving. We earnestly request that by the power of the Holy Spirit you will restore our faith and the faith of others. We pray that Christ will draw us to himself and that his love for us may find expression in our love for one another. Finally, we pray that Christ will strengthen our hearts in holiness, that we may live as people who know ourselves to be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. Amen.