

First Sunday of Advent

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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How do you know that Christmas is near? For some, it's the first snow storm and pulling out the winter coat. For others, it's the transition from pumpkin spice to peppermint. Still others, know it's near when holiday music is played, the garland is hung, and presents are wrapped. Well, in today's gospel, Jesus also speaks of signs. Indicators in the sky, sea, and, even, the psyche. Fainting from fear, disturbances in the heavens, and blooming fig trees.

If you're anything like me, I'm not always great at picking up on signs. Maybe it's because I don't know what to look for. Perhaps I am unaware of the world around me, or too self-absorbed. It could be that I choose to ignore or reject the signs. And, I hope I'm not the only one. For you, it could be how blindsided you felt after the 2016 election after not realizing that fear, resentment, and dissatisfaction had been growing in our country. Or not realizing the signs related to a mental or physical illness, or missing the moments leading up to a wave of grief, or that you didn't know that your partners actions were considered abuse. It is impossible to be aware of everything.

How can we keep up with everything from climate change to the militarization of our southern border, the details of what's happening with family and friends, the changes going on at work or school, and everything that is in between? Complete awareness is an impossible challenge.

That's where today's apocalyptic vision of Luke enters the scene. It's in the midst of these signs that we see our God who exposes reality and calls us to be awake. You see, that is the function apocalyptic language. After all, the word "apocalypse" is a Greek word meaning "revelation" or "unveiling." And, apocalyptic words, images, and signs help to expose something that we don't often see on our own.

That is the awareness Luke brings. You see, in the year ahead we will come to see God revealed in new ways. We'll come to see how Jesus fulfills the story of God, the story of Israel, and the story of the world. We will come to an awareness that God's activity in the world is based on radical generosity, peacemaking, and forgiveness. We will hear of Jesus healing the sick and welcoming the outsider. We'll learn what it's like to live a life centered in abundance and servant leadership. We'll discover that being a person of faith is not a once-and-done moment, but that it is a life-long journey towards awareness. But Luke's gospel doesn't try to make us aware of every little thing. Instead, Luke reveals to us how we can become more aware of God's ever-present activity in the world.

And, Jesus doesn't mince words here. Jesus does not give us false hope. Jesus doesn't sugar-coat the truth. Because, being a person of faith does not mean calm waters, life-long clarity, and that bad things won't happen. Rather, being a follower of Christ reminds us that instead of hanging our head in disappointment and fear, we stand up and lift our heads because redemption is near. We are reminded that even though "heaven and earth will pass away, [Christ's] words will not pass away." And those are the words we hear at this table that, "This is my body given for you; this is my blood shed for you." Those are the words that promise that God will be with us. Those are the words that remind us that we have been forgiven. And, those are the words echoed time and again in Luke's gospel that say "do not fear!"

In those words, we have the knowledge that in trauma and turmoil we are not alone. We know that we have the opportunity to respond to the world with a glimpse of God's grace and love. As one author puts it, we respond not because we believe our actions will change the world, but because we know God has already changed the world. We act because no action that is done in love and courage, no matter how small, is ever wasted. You see, it's not our job to save the world, but rather, because

God has saved the world, we have the opportunity to care for the part of the world where we have influence.¹

So, it's because of God's gifts that we work to improve our awareness. It's with the assurance that God's words will always remain, that we read the news without fear. It's with the confidence in God's vision for the world, that we begin to take small steps to curb climate change. It's with the knowledge that our God welcomes all people, that we can share our comfort with those who are in distress.

In a few short moments, we'll experience a widening awareness with the Great Litany. It's long, there's no denying that, but in its length it's expansive and allows us to develop our awareness. We will call to mind war, famine, and earthquakes. We will remember the mystery of Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection. We'll recall our leaders and those in need. And, the circle will continue to expand to those actively giving birth, those who are sick, and those with whom we disagree. In the end, we'll have expanded our awareness broadly, and, then, we'll bring it back to where we began – centered in God's mercy.

¹ Following the thoughts of <http://www.davidlose.net/2018/11/advent-1-c-courage/>

Friends, today we begin a new church year. With this beginning, we look towards our God's presence in a small child in Bethlehem born to an unmarried teen, but we also recognize that God is present now and for all eternity. In the weeks before Christmas, we'll work to raise our awareness of God's presence in the world. We'll come to see those in want and in distress. We'll come to see God's presence working through you and me, through the neighbor next door and the delivery person, through the cashier and the waitstaff. We'll come to see God's presence not only in the Christ child, but also in the present and into our future. So, the question for this Advent season is not *if* we will see God's presence, rather we'll ask *where* our new-found awareness will lead us to see God's presence. That is the pursuit of Advent, so keep awake, my friends. Amen.