

“Jesus is coming”
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The First Sunday in Advent
Brentwood 1st Presbyterian Church

This is the third in a series of six sermons on building the spirituality of a church. This church. Today the lectionary also starts a one year series of sermons on the Good News according to Luke. I admit I have an affinity for Luke. You see, he was a physician and a preacher. He has more medical terms in his Gospel than any other Gospel. Terms like “dissipation,” which occur only in medical literature of his era. Scripture says Luke was Apostle Paul’s physician and traveling companion. But Luke has more parables than any of the other Gospels. It is only in Luke that we read about the parable of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. This tells us that Luke’s Gospel is more than just an historical account. Luke the physician is also a preacher.

Nehemiah 4:1-3
Luke 21:25-36

Sequence 1

Bad things happen to us. “There will be signs.” “People will faint from fear.” Only a few hundred years before Jesus’ birth, a volcanic eruption sinks a heavily populated island below the Aegean Sea. The resulting tidal waves kill many on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Mt Vesuvius blows her top, covering and killing Pompeii with ash. In Luke’s era, in 70 AD, the Romans destroy the Temple of Jerusalem, the center of Jewish worship. You ain’t heard nothing yet.

An earthquake shatters the floor of the Indian Ocean. The resulting tidal wave kills many Muslims and destroys many homes. Maybe God does not love people on the other side of the world. Because they are different and do not believe in Jesus.

A hurricane violates the gulf coast. It kills many Christians and destroys their homes. Oops, maybe bad things happen to Christians. So maybe bad things are unrelated to God's love. Then one of my patients tells me God does not love that sinful city of New Orleans.

Tornadoes rip through rural Tennessee last Spring. They kill many pious people and destroy their homes. Oops, maybe bad things do not just happen to people who live in sinful cities. Maybe they also happen to people who are pious.

Despair settles into a church, robbing it of spiritual energy and strength. The church loses its vision and vitality, and slips into decline.

After all, "There will be signs." "People will faint from fear."

There is no one bad thing that comes once and predicts the end of the world. Bad things have always happened, are happening now, and will continue to happen in the future. And not just to "them." Also to us. Bad things happen to good people.

Sequence 2

But is it your salvation from despair to party, drink, and shop until you drop? Jesus tells you no. He says to do these things will allow you to miss the opportunity to see Jesus in and be Jesus to other people. The day of redemption of both you and those you could help will catch you unexpectedly, like a trap! You will miss the opportunity. But for those who stay alert,

"They will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud."

In the Hebrew Bible, the advent or coming of the Son of Man with power and glory is redemptive. It is the coming of the Messiah's rule.

Jesus says, “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 here.” The parable of the fig tree putting forth leaves in the spring heralding the summer shows that certain things herald the coming of the Son of Man. Misery precedes redemption like the fig leaves precede the summer.

Yes, God is near when you suffer. “When you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.”

I read a book recently that says God releases us from embrace at birth, and we go back to God’s embrace at death. But I think scripture tells us this not really true. God does not just release us from God’s embrace at birth, and receive us back when we die. God is also present with us during our life. “When you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.”

*I have seen a nurse holding a baby’s hand as the baby takes her first breath, and giving the baby her **first** bath. I have seen a nurse holding the hand of a cancer patient as he takes his last breath, and giving his **last** bath. I think God’s presence is like a nurse. And God’s loving presence is also with us before we are born and after we die. But also all the time in between. I don’t know about you, but I see God’s presence in a nurse. I also see God’s presence in you.*

As Sanballat asks in the book of Nehemiah, will we revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish – burned ones at that? God is near us both in times of happiness and in times of sadness. God is present always. And when we look for God’s presence, we see it. Knowledge of God’s presence replaces despair with hope. But knowledge of God’s presence requires 4 spiritual practices: 1. energizing worship, 2. Bible study, 3. mission

outreach, and 4. prayers of adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication.

Remember the acronym ACTS: adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication.

With God's help, we can do these 4 spiritual practices: worship, Bible study, mission outreach, and prayer.

Armed with these 4 spiritual practices, the first disciples, and you, when faced with suffering and death, you do not need to cower. You may, as Jesus says in Luke, "stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." In the words of Charles Wesley in today's hymn, "Jesus is born to reign in us forever."

Sequence 3

Jesus came once and for all but not all at once.

"This generation will not pass away until all things have taken place." "For the day that God's kingdom comes near will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth."

God's love is either truly unconditional or it is truly not. God either loves all of God's creation, or God does not.

35 years ago, an Auburn University student knocks on the door to my college dorm room. Are you saved he asks? Saved from what?, I respond. You see, I grew up in a household where God's love was never in question. In my household, God's love was unconditional. There was nothing I could do to earn it. Neither the right deeds nor the right creeds. God loves me regardless what I do and regardless whether my convictions are true or unfounded. God also loves you unconditionally. All of humanity is created by God. All human beings are children of God. God no more turns away a child of God than would a mother turn away a nursing child. "This generation will not pass away until all things have taken place." "For the day that God's kingdom comes near will come upon

all who live on the face of the whole earth.” *God’s love for humanity is radically inclusive and unconditional. God’s loving presence affirms your salvation from sin and suffering.*

God’s love is so unconditional and so radically inclusive it blows our feeble minds. In our attempt to understand God, we try to explain God’s love in human terms. We cannot do it, because God is not human. Unlike our love, God’s love is not conditional on having the right convictions or performing the right deeds. God loves us unconditionally. And God’s love is radically inclusive.

Conclusion

Tsunamis, Katrina, and tornadoes. God’s presence like a nurse. By what are we saved? Good deeds or right convictions? No. We cannot hit the mark all the time. From what are we saved? Hell fire and eternal damnation? No. A good God would never, no never turn God’s back on God’s children.

Advent is the season we celebrate the coming of Jesus. Jesus came 2000 years ago, but still comes to us every day. In the words of Wesley in today’s hymn, Jesus is born to set us free from fear and sin. Every day, God loves us and saves us FROM the power of sin, BY God’s mercy, love, and forgiveness, FOR the purpose of hearing Jesus IN and being Jesus TO the sick, the poor, and the oppressed among us. Yes, Jesus loves you. Yes, Jesus comes. Yes, every day.

In the birth of a helpless baby all the powers of the universe find that their days of power are numbered. Nothing will ever be the same. The whole world will be filled with heaven’s peace. Wait and see!