

# First Sunday of Advent

Year C

RCL



Jeremiah 33:14-16

Psalms 25:1-9

Luke 21:25-36

## The Collect

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

## **Jeremiah 33:14-16**

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: “The LORD is our righteousness.”

## Psalm 25:1-9

- 1 To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul;  
my God, I put my trust in you; \*  
let me not be humiliated,  
nor let my enemies triumph over me.
- 2 Let none who look to you be put to shame; \*  
let the treacherous be disappointed in their schemes.
- 3 Show me your ways, O LORD, \*  
and teach me your paths.
- 4 Lead me in your truth and teach me, \*  
for you are the God of my salvation;  
in you have I trusted all the day long.
- 5 Remember, O LORD, your compassion and love, \*  
for they are from everlasting.
- 6 Remember not the sins of my youth and my transgressions; \*  
remember me according to your love  
and for the sake of your goodness, O LORD.
- 7 Gracious and upright is the LORD; \*  
therefore he teaches sinners in his way.
- 8 He guides the humble in doing right \*

and teaches his way to the lowly.

9 All the paths of the LORD are love and faithfulness \*  
to those who keep his covenant and his testimonies.

## **Luke 21:25-36**

Jesus said, “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 he 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 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.”

## SERMON

I'm always uncomfortable when the Revised Common Lectionary serves up one of the apocalyptic passages from the Synoptic Gospels. Matthew, Mark and Luke all have such passages, and they all make me a little uncomfortable because preaching on the Second Coming is associated in many peoples' minds with churches that emphasize a strictly prophetic reading of Scripture. I try to remind myself, when one of these passages appear, that there has to be more to it than fortune telling. Apocalyptic passages must offer something of great value to worshipers, for they appear so frequently. Let's see if we can jump from reading tea leaves to something of more importance. As Chris Cuomo often says, "Let's get after it".

To understand the true treasure these passages have to offer, we have to get a little theologically technical, and

I hope you'll bear with me while I lay down a foundation. I promise, it will get better.

My better educated brother, Rev. Lon Oliver, suggested I study the writings of Fr. Henri Nouwen, and I found there something of great interest. Fr. Nouwen was writing of the “nuclear man”. Nuclear man, he writes, is a man who has lost naïve faith in the possibilities of technology and is painfully aware that the same powers that enable man to create new life styles carry the potential for self-destruction. Nuclear man is the man who realizes that his creative powers hold the potential for self-destruction. Nuclear man is us – contemporary people who are suffering from three deadly ailments they can hardly describe.

1. The first is **Historical Dislocation**. For nuclear man the future has become an option. For him, the problem is not that the future holds a new danger, such as a nuclear war, but that there might be no fu-



ture at all. Nuclear man thinks of himself more as one of the “last ones in the experiment of living” than as a pioneer working for a new future. Why should a man marry and have children, study and build a career when he doubts there will be a tomorrow which can guarantee the value of human effort? Nuclear man doesn’t see himself connected to the past in a real way, and doubts the future.

2. The second ailment is a **Fragmented Ideology**.

Nuclear man no longer believes in anything that is always and everywhere true and valid. He lives by the hour and creates his life on the spot. Hence, he accepts the notion of “alternative facts” as a reasonable assertion. Nuclear man has a gut (by which he means whatever thought has come to him which agrees with his mood at the time), and believes that his gut tells him more than anybody else’s brain can ever tell him, so he rockets from ideology to ideology in a dizzying dance to no music.

3. The third ailment is a **Loss of the Search for Immortality**. When man is no longer able to look beyond his own death and relate himself to what extends beyond the time and space of his life, he loses his desire to create and the excitement of being

human.

These are mortal ailments, deadly diseases. Fr. Nouwen summarizes:

**When we wonder why the language of traditional Christianity has lost its liberating power for nuclear man, we have to realize that most Christian preaching is still based on the presupposition that man sees himself as meaningfully integrated with a history in which God came to us in the past, is living under us in the present, and will come to liberate us in the future.**

Whatever else you take from this sermon, don't let that blow past you! We suffer because we no longer see ourselves as meaningfully integrated with a history described by the three comings of God – God came to us in the past in the human form of Jesus, is living with us in the present, and will come to liberate us in the future. Luke isn't giving us hints to watch for in the heavens. He is telling us that our hope lies in embracing the three

comings of Christ – in the past, the present and the future. Luke is telling us that God’s presence is not an intellectual exercise, nor less a sentimental sop, but the constant and unfailing reality of all we see.

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.

The future God has decreed will come. It is not an option. We, who claim the name of Christ, must be meaningfully integrated with a history in which God came to us in the past, walks with us in the present, and will come to liberate us in the future. That is always and everywhere true and valid. We are able to look beyond our own death and relate ourselves to what extends beyond the time and space of our lives. In short, we who claim the name of Christ are freed from the ailments of nucle-

ar man, freed to live within God's grace, courageously, but not without demands. A life without demands and challenges is no life at all. We must understand our limitations in order to understand God's gift of grace.

**Presbyterians believe the Bible when it says that “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God”. Unlike crime, which involves the breaking of human law, sin is a condition of the heart or an expression of that condition where we are estranged from God and fail to trust in God. Sin expresses itself in particular acts.**

I would add that refraining from the particular bad acts does not erase the stain of sin. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God for all suffer from our estrangement from God and failure to trust in Him.

When Jeremiah told his people:

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at

that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: “The LORD is our righteousness.”

he wasn't only offering a word of comfort and encouragement. He was telling them that they live within the comprehensive ocean of God's will for His people, and God will have His way. We are not isolated, historically dislocated bumps on the quotidian – we are a part of the tidal flow of God's righteousness extending from Creation to the end of times. Without that sense of continuity contemporary man finds himself part of a nonhistory, in which only the sharp moment of the here and now is valuable. Life becomes an exercise in apathy and boredom and so contemporary man retreats from it into headphones and video games. But a life lived in aware-

ness of the three comings of God, of the continuity of God's will, a life lived in the certainty that you, now, are part of that will, can never be approached apathetically. Such a life can never be historically dislocated for you were created for a purpose. You have meaning which extends beyond your own death and relates you to what extends beyond the time and space of your life. You are a vital part of God's will.

Live into that awareness, church. Know, in the words of my home church, that there is no creed but Christ. You were created for a purpose. Finding and fulfilling that purpose is the reason for your life.

AMEN

## BENEDICTION

“Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so...” Wait. What?

I know my parents and grandparents loved me because of the care they showed me, not because I read something about it in a book. I know my parents and grandparents loved me because they fed me, and clothed me, and taught me, directing my steps in positive directions, even when my unformed soul caused me to do awful, stupid and shameful things. I know my parents and grandparents loved me because their care of me demonstrated that love.

Be ever aware of the love of your father, who planned you from the beginnings of Creation, who, when the time was right, loved you into existence, who walks with you now directing your steps and who promises you that there will be a future – a future of which you

will be part. You were created for a purpose. Never let that slip from your consciousness.

The Lord bless you and keep you;  
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;  
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

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Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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