

So today is Advent Sunday. It's the first day of the church's year. We begin a new liturgical year today, and Advent Sunday, in fact, Advent season is in some ways a challenging time. The Gospel reading, it's always the same reading with Jesus sounding his most apocalyptic. He speaks here like one of the Old Testament prophets who gave gloomy warnings of extreme weather. So, our reading begins, "There will be signs in the sun, the moon and the stars, roaring of the sea and the waves." And when the prophets speak like that, you know that the next sentence isn't going to be, "And the rest of the country will be partly cloudy with scattered showers." In apocalyptic language, it's bad everywhere. There's no escape.

Flannery O'Connor wrote, "To the hard of hearing, you shout, and for the almost blind, you draw large and startling figures," and that's what Jesus is doing here. He's drawing on the apocalyptic language of the prophets. He's shouting and drawing large, startling figures. He uses every rhetorical device at his disposal to get the attention of his listeners, so they realize the gravity of the situation. "Be alert," he says. "Wake up, pay attention to the coming kingdom." This is the message that we hear every Advent season, just as the shops we go into are all being decorated with lights and baubles and you can't go anywhere without the irritating sound of piped carols. Advent takes us to a much darker place. Advent begins in the dark. It's not a season for the fainthearted.

You may have noticed that the Christmas tree that has been serving as our "giving tree" for the last few weeks has been moved outside, and we invite everyone, if they're part of the pledge campaign, to take one of your St. James shell and put it on your tree, a great metaphor for the fact that just as everyone else outside the church is putting up their decorations, we're taking ours out. Everybody else is putting baubles on a tree. We're looking to strip our tree, because we're not yet in the Christmas season in church. This is Advent with its own particular, startling message. Advent is hard-edged. It doesn't make for pretty greeting cards, and it provides a wonderful antidote to the faux cheeriness of the Christmas season.

The central message of Advent is to prepare for the coming of the king. Both of our readings refer to the coming of Jesus, and Advent relates to the French word, *venir*, to come, but it isn't a reference to the coming of Jesus as a baby in Bethlehem. Advent is about Christ's second coming, when he will return with great power and great glory to establish his new kingdom. And this sense of an end pervades all the gospels, and it's an important part of Christian teaching. It doesn't get much attention in our Episcopal tradition, and there are some traditions which give it too much attention, as I discovered when I went on the End-time Chronology website, which is a rabbit hole I wish I hadn't gone down. But this Advent message can't be ignored. It's embedded in our creeds, it's there in our liturgy. Listen in the Eucharistic prayer to the references to, "Until He comes." That's the Advent message embedded in our service week after week, not just in the season of Advent.

As Christians, we live with a strong sense of an end, which I think is a good thing. I like ends. Ends make sense of things. Ends give us a sense of perspective, which help us to make sense of things. That's why personally, I like a book to have a good end. There's nothing worse than getting to the end of a book and it peters out. I want a book with a strong sense of an end, when you realize, oh yes, that's who the killer was. That's why he did that earlier in the book. Oh, that's why so-and-so disappeared or did that. That's an end making sense of things.

We talk of having 20/20 vision in hindsight, because it's only when we look back that we see things clearly. That's when we see things working out as they did. Things always look clearer with hindsight. Often when we're in the middle of something, we think, "Oh, I wish I'd known what was going to happen then. Then I would've done this." Well, the great thing about the Bible's teaching about the end is that we know how the story of this world will end. We know that one day, Jesus will return, that the God who created the world will act and intervene to recreate it in one glorious day. We know that nothing in this world will be wasted or go unnoticed. God will act to establish His justice when He initiates His new and

final kingdom, and I find this a very encouraging message.

I'd hate to think that the world will just peter out, and I read in a journal this week that that's what some scientists think, that it won't be climate change that finishes off the world, but there's a limited life in the world, and one day, all the energy will disappear and it will peter out. I can't imagine a world where that happens, that just goes round and round interminably. I'm encouraged by the idea that God is taking stock, that God is working His purposes out, and that there will be a day of reckoning when all wrongs will be righted in God's glorious new kingdom.

And the Bible doesn't give us much detail about that kingdom, but we get snippets. It's a bit like being on a train late at night and the train's going very fast, and you know when you go through a station because there are lights there, so you know that there's a town somewhere there. But you don't know the name of the town because you're going so fast, you can't read the sign on the platform, but you know from the lights that it's there. You can't tell one town from the next. You can't see the detail, but you know it's there. So it is with heaven. We don't know the details. We get glimpses, we get snippets, but we know it's there in a way we can't quite make out.

When CS Lewis was talking about the last days of the second coming, he used the analogy of actors in a drama. He wrote this: We don't know everything about the play, whether we're in the first act or the last act, or even which characters play the minor and the major roles. In our ignorance, we really have no idea when the end of the play ought to come, but the plot will find fulfillment, even if our limited understanding right now obscures it. Perhaps the author will fill us in after it's over, but for now, playing it well is what matters infinitely. There will be an end, and that end gives us a perspective from which to view our lives. We can imagine ourselves in God's new kingdom, that it is established at the end, looking back on our life. And if we do that, if we imagine looking back on our life from that perspective, how

does our life look? Are we investing in the right things? What has true value from the perspective of eternity?

These are the kinds of questions we are invited to ponder on Advent Sunday and in this Advent season, so let's wake up this Advent from our materialist slumber. Let's not forget that another day is coming. Let's watch for the signs of God's kingdom, and let's pray this Advent prayer with Robert Herhold who prayed this. "Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly. We don't know and understand what this means, but don't let that stop you." Amen.