

## Advent II (10 December 2023)

“AND there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations... men’s hearts failing them for fear... for the powers of heaven shall be shaken. And then shall they see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. And when these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh.”

+In the Name...

Fear can be a great motivator. We have all been scared to varying degrees. Sometimes we think we have been as scared as is humanly possible, until a scarier incident comes along. I met a man in the bakery this week who told me a story that he said I should use in a sermon. It can be challenging to be given something completely divorced from the readings and told one has to use it in a sermon. It is the sort of thing seminarians would do for fun. Here goes: this man

grew up in a Protestant household. They were not so much Protestant as they were “anti-Catholic”. (He used that term.) When he walked to school, each day he had to cross a very busy street. He approached said street from a sideroad so there was no signal. Normally he would walk out of his way and go to the signal. On one particular day he was running late so he decided he would sprint across the several lanes of traffic. There was a car coming, but he judged he could make it across the road without getting hit. He got across the first lanes and stopped in the median when he realized the car was approaching too fast for him to continue. That was when he noticed several saint statues on the dashboard of the car. He deduced from his upbringing that the Catholic driver must have earned one each time he ran down a Protestant! The man said he turned around, retracing his steps back over the first set of lanes. Getting away from the car was not enough,

but he went and hid in a bush until he was certain that the driver was not coming back for him. So much for not being late to school!

Today is known as “Bible Sunday” in many parts of the Anglican Communion, so named because of our collect and epistle which address the importance of Holy Scripture in the life of the Church. As you likely guessed, Abp. Thomas Cranmer did not merely translate the Latin collect used in the Roman Church at the time, but composed an entirely new collect for this Sunday, stressing that God caused “*all* Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning” because he devised a system where the entire Bible would be read in a year if one prayed the daily offices of Morning and Evening Prayer. So, you will be disappointed if you were hoping for a sermon about a saint or a doctrine today. How could I choose not to preach on our Scripture lessons, given that history?

So, while the Collect and epistle seem to be *about* Holy Scripture, the Gospel puts us squarely in waiting for the Second Coming of Our Lord, easy to overlook as we rush along hither and yon preparing for the commemoration of Our Lord's first coming in a mere two weeks. The passage starts with the facts that there will be signs in the sky and in the wider world. Both Our Lord and St. Luke would have been familiar with the apocalyptic literature of the time. In the daily offices we are reading through the prophet Isaiah in both Morning and Evening Prayer, and the Revelation of St. John at Evening Prayer. Yet it would be easier to discern the physical signs of the end of the world than the spiritual. (Either a fig tree is producing fruit or it is not.) Scripture tells there will be false prophets who will lead the faithful astray with their tantalizing words and hopeful promises, yet they will not be faithful to the Word of God. It will be the final conflict between good and evil. Some of Our Lord's first

followers thought that the end would be in their lifetimes. Today we are so complacent that likely none of us think it will be in our lifetimes! Yet given the political realities of our world, we see the devastation caused by wars and atrocities on our televisions, computers, and phones as vividly as if it were next door. Imagine for a minute if you were in Gaza on October 7<sup>th</sup>. You were reading a book, making breakfast, or if it had been me, probably still in bed! What if the first thing you heard was the siren warning you of the attack? Or would it had been worse if the first thing you heard was the attack itself? That would be a fear like nothing I have ever experienced! I daresay unlike anything my acquaintance in the bakery has ever experienced either. I chose October 7<sup>th</sup> because it is fresh in our minds. You choose the incident: Israel, an attack in the Ukraine, a school shooting, or a car mowing down the participants of a Christmas parade. Now the end of the world does not seem so far-

fetched, does it? Of course, Scripture tells us that we will know neither the day nor the hour, and I surely am not claiming any inside knowledge. The point is to be ready, to be ready by preparation. In Friday's Old Testament lesson was from the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of Isaiah, famously included in most versions of the Advent Lessons and Carols. It starts, "In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up..." This gives the reader historical context because Uzziah died in 740 BC of a disease that was believed to be judgment on him because he entered the temple to burn incense, a job reserved for the priests. Isaiah told of one of the angels who came to him with a hot coal in order to purify his lips. One of the prayers the priest says at mass is based on this passage, asking that the priest be worthy to proclaim the Gospel to the people. The people also must be worthy to hear.

Meanwhile we are also hearing the 7<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Revelation of St. John the Divine. This is the divine judgment of both the Jews and the gentiles. While as Anglicans we may not believe that the end of the world will come about exactly as the “Left Behind” series portrays it, we just as surely believe it will come.

Maybe this is where the idea of Advent being a “little Lent” still comes into play: even if we are not trying to live it as a penitential season, it would be difficult to consider the last days of the earth without thinking seriously about our lives.

As the Advent opening verse to Evening Prayer, quoting St. Mark, says, “Watch ye, for ye know not when the master of the house cometh, at even, or at midnight, or at the cock-crowing, or in the morning: lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping.” It does not have to be scary, brethren, because we know we belong to Jesus Christ.

+In the Name...