**November 30, 2014 – First Sunday of Advent**

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In the immortal words of R.E.M., “It's the end of the world as we know it, and I feel fine.”

As I usually say on the first first Sunday of Advent, the text chosen for this day is always an apocalyptic one. The Gospel of John, being the odd one out, doesn’t have a passage like this, but Matthew and Luke do, along with the one from Mark that we heard today. And they all have essentially the same message – there will be signs in the heavens of the sun and moon going dark, stars falling, natural disasters, before the Son of Man comes back. And we’d better watch out.

Like it says in Ghostbusters, “Real wrath-of-God type stuff! Fire and brimstone coming down from the sky! Rivers and seas boiling! Forty years of darkness! Earthquakes, volcanoes! The dead rising from the grave! Human sacrifice! Dogs and cats, living together! Mass hysteria!

All of the Gospels seem to be silent about the dogs and cats, but the rest seems to be just about right. But why on earth do we hear about this during Advent? Well, as I have said before Advent is a complex season.

Easter is pretty straightforward – you have Palm Sunday, the betrayal in the garden, the crucifixion, the Resurrection. Christmas, too. Jesus is born, swaddled, adored, and given presents. All very straightforward. But not Advent. Advent is complicated.

For one thing, we’re starting at the end. Literally. The end of the world. I think it should tell us something that the first thing we hear about during this season is the second coming of Jesus. For Pete’s sake, we haven’t even had the first coming yet and we’re supposed to be thinking about the second?

Yes. Yes, we are. That’s exactly the point. The two go hand in hand. Just like we can’t think about the Resurrection without the Cross, we can’t think about the birth of Jesus without the second coming. Because, in some ways, that’s what it’s all about.

Sometimes, I think we lose track of the idea that Jesus came to earth – became human, and lived, and died as one of us – for a reason. And part of the reason that we lose track is that it’s just such a huge idea that our brains seize up trying to wrap themselves around it. God becoming human. GOD! Becoming like us! Holy moly!

When I started down this path for this sermon, I almost chickened out. It’s just TOO big. Better to talk about keeping watch, and celebrating a holy Advent, and don’t rush the season, and things like that. And I will do that, but to chicken out is to cheapen this first Sunday of Advent and its apocalyptic message, which has real meaning for our lives today.

So here goes.

As to why Jesus became human and lived and died 2,000 years ago, only God knows. Literally, only God knows. So everything I say here is a theory, born of some study, some prayer, some faith, and some imagination. Since I’m pretty sure this is how most theologians have come to their own theories, I feel I’m in good company. For that matter, you don’t need to be told these things – you can form your own ideas using those same resources. You don’t even have to go to seminary!

But, since I’m the preacher today, you get to hear mine. First of all, Jesus, who is God, became human because God loves us. I realize that that’s kind of a bumper sticker phrase, but it’s the truth. It’s the foundation of our faith. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believes in him may not perish but will have everlasting life.”

I don’t know why God loves us so much, because frankly, we’re not all that loveable sometimes. Maybe the way we’re hardwired to love our own children is a pale reflection of the kind of love God has for us. Maybe we were created in the first place in order for God to love us. God’s love is a pretty big mystery to me, and yet I know it’s real.

So if God loves us so much, why all the drama? Why any kind of apocalypse at all? Why not just fields full of flowers and butterflies and bright sunshine when Jesus returns? Well, one idea is that God seems to want us to be in complete communion with him.

Think about that for a minute. Complete communion with God. And not just in communion, but entering fully into the Holy Trinity as a member of the family. Julian of Norwich, in her description of her visions of Christ, talks about Jesus being the firstborn son of many, and those many are us. And In Romans 8:16-18, Paul writes:

It is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.

Talk about the end of the world as we know it! The apocalypse – what Mark is talking about here – is the complete remaking of the world, starting from scratch, into the Kingdom of God. It’s not a disaster, however much Mark’s description makes it sound. It’s a rebirth, and birth is always dramatic.

So this is why it’s important to us, and this is why we talk about it in the beginning of Advent. This rebirth of the world starts with a little baby, whose birth we will celebrate in four and a half weeks. God’s promise to us to be in full communion with him, for us, starts in that stable. It’s important that we pay attention.

Which brings us to the other part of what of the Little Apocalypses, as these passages are called in the Synoptic Gospels have to tell us – the part about keeping awake. Seems to me, with all the stars falling and sun going dark and earthquakes and things, if you weren’t awake before, that sure as heck would get your attention. I mean, Jesus may come as a thief in the night at first, but all the trumpets and angels and things would put the kibosh on any sneakiness pretty darn quick.

So keeping watch must have some other meaning, too. If you look at the Greek word for keep watch, *grégoreo*, it means to be awake, watchful, and vigilant. It’s more than merely being on the lookout. It’s actively anticipating what’s coming. It’s the difference between waiting on a street corner for a bus and waiting on that same street corner for a parade to come by.

There’s also an element of keeping your wits about you. Not so that you’ll NOTICE when Christ returns, but so that you’ll be able to fully enter into the experience when it happens. And that’s why we talk about it in Advent.

The holiday season, which seems to start at Halloween these days, is a season of craziness and distraction. By the time Christmas arrives, we’re done. Our brains and our bodies are fried from planning and decorating and shopping and wrapping and cooking and eating. Instead of being a season of joy, Christmas becomes a season of “Oh thank God THAT’S over for another year.” God’s epic inbreaking into our world and our lives is an afterthought to us, if it’s thought about at all.

So we have this season of anticipation and preparation, called Advent. Advent tells us to slow down. Advent tells us to keep our wits about us and stay alert, but calmly so, not in a frenzied panic. Advent tells us to savor the miracle that is about to happen, and everything that means for us.

As I do every year, I encourage each of us to do all these things. I don’t mean lock ourselves up in a monastery or something, but to take a little time out of each day or each week to think about what it means that God loves us so much that he sent his only son to live and die one of us. Think a little about what peace on earth and good will towards all people really means, and what our role in that might be in the coming year. Just stop, for a minute, and think. And have a blessed Advent!

Amen.