

Sunday, December 1, 2024
First Sunday of Advent (Year C)
Jeremiah 33.14-16; Luke 21.25-36

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/587198530535216>

(Sermon begins at about 1:35)

“Advent Time Travel”

I am intrigued by the concept of time travel. Particularly the subtle nuances that could theoretically affect time. There are a variety of factors or potential paradoxes that are often explored in theoretical and science fiction writings about time travel. Perhaps the best known of these is the “grandfather paradox.” The concept that if someone were to travel back in time, they could do something, even inadvertently, that would change the timeline. The name derives from the concept that if someone were to go back in time and kill their own grandfather before he had any children, it would not be possible for that person to have been born. In which case, how could he have gone back in time in the first place. Thereby creating a mind-bending paradox.

As time goes on—pun intended—such concepts and nuances of time travel have been explored and expanded, both in theoretical physics, as well as the science fiction genre. And certainly, in the latter, resulting in increasingly clever explanations, variations, and even workarounds to time travel paradoxes. In all cases, proving to be mind-bending, if not mind-numbing, as one attempts to follow the twists and turns in logic needed to explain some of these ideas.

In many ways, the season of Advent we begin today has some similar qualities. A journey through time—past, present, and future—in ways we do not experience in other seasons of the Church year. The time we anticipate the first Advent of Jesus at his birth in Bethlehem. While, at the same time, anticipating the second Advent of Christ at the end of the ages—what we commonly refer to as the Second Coming. In one season, anticipating what has already occurred in the past and anticipating what is to come. The coming together of past and future.

Today, our lectionary provides us with readings that could fit fairly nicely into the time travel genre. As someone who is both a biblical studies geek and a fan of science fiction, you can begin to see how one could make that leap, particularly with respect to prophecies and fulfillment of prophecies.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus presents what commentators call the “little apocalypse.” A prophecy foretelling the end of the ages: “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.” Ominous warnings of what is to come. Or, as many have noted, signs that are currently happening, being an indication we just might be in the end times. Although truth be told, people have been reading that into Jesus’ words for nearly two millennia, and yet, we’re still here.

What I mean by this “little apocalypse” having a sci-fi time travel quality is that this reading, occurring where it does in our lectionary cycle and in the arc of Jesus’ life and ministry, can be a bit mind-bending. Here, on the first Sunday of Advent, the season in which we anticipate the birth of Jesus, we hear a sermon preached by the adult Jesus mere days before his death. A sermon in which he foretells the end of the ages. Not only that, foretelling the part he will play at the end of the ages: “Then they will see ‘the Son of Man [that would be Jesus] coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory.” This appearance on his part being in some far distant future, yet only made possible because of the events that will happen to him in his very near future: his death and resurrection. In this one brief story, we the audience, who have the benefit of both hindsight and foresight, are taken to Jesus’ past, to the present moment in which he is speaking, to his near future, and to the far-flung future. We experience in this one moment Jesus’ birth, his final moments with his disciples, his death and resurrection, and his salvation at the end of the ages. All in this one story, in this one moment.

And to further add to the unique time travel nature of this day and Jesus’ prophecy, all this is foretold in another prophecy that is the subject of our first reading from Jeremiah. “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.” Branch being an ancient messianic title referenced in the prophecies of Zechariah and Isaiah. Here, Jeremiah conveying God’s promise to send the Messiah from the line of King David to be the savior of the people. The one we know as Jesus, Son of God. So, in our scripture readings for today, we have the ancient prophecy of the birth of the One we await and celebrate this season; the One who mere days before his death and resurrection delivers another prophecy, speaking of his role at the end of the ages. A thread running through our timeline connecting past, present, and future in the person of Jesus.

All of this centered around and framed within apocalyptic narrative. Apocalyptic meaning “uncovering” or “revealing.” Stories in which God reveals, even in the midst of chaos, the deliverance that is to come. In which God reveals, even in the midst of darkness, the light that is to come to vanquish the darkness. In which God provides a sign of hope, even in the midst of despair when all hope seems to be lost. “I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he will execute justice and righteousness in the land.” And, “Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory.” Jeremiah’s prophecy of the Incarnation, the birth of the Messiah, itself being a fulfillment of an end-time prophecy. A series of prophecies looping back on each other, fulfilling each other. Providing the hope needed in every age in which those prophecies are uttered: past, present, and future.

Jesus emphasizes this message of hope in the second part of his discourse to his disciples in the parable of the fig tree: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they spout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near.” The fig tree being an ancient symbol of life emerging out of death. In the winter, the fig tree is gnarled and barren. But come summer, it is lush and green, teeming with fruit. This parable carrying a message of hope that new life will arise out of apparent death. That hope will arise out of despair. Jesus then tells the disciples, “So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.” In other words, they are to be attentive. They are not to give in to the despair, the

sense of hopelessness. They are to be assured that better days are ahead. They are to continually look for the signs of the coming of God's kingdom. And just to be sure they get the message, he tells them that their job is to "be alert at all times."

In these instruction to the disciples, in these instruction to us, Jesus brings us solidly into the Advent journey. The journey that began with prophecies of the coming of the Messiah. The journey that continues with Jesus' birth at Christmas. The journey that continues with his life and ministry. The journey that continues with prophecies of the end of the ages. The journey that continues with his death and resurrection. The journey that will be completed with the Son of Man coming at the end of the ages. All these threads woven together into an intricate tapestry of what Advent means in its many forms. All characterized by our watching and waiting.

I love the image of Advent presented by Bernard of Clairvaux, the twelfth-century Cistercian monk, abbot, mystic, and theologian. He wrote of three Advents. The first is the Incarnation, the Advent of Jesus at his birth on Christmas. The last is the *Parousia*, the Advent at the end of the ages, which is the primary subject of today's Gospel. These are the ones we commonly think of this time of year. But according to Bernard, there is a second or middle Advent between these two. The everyday coming of Jesus into our lives. Often occurring in seemingly small ways: a kind gesture by a stranger, an unexpected call or message, a visit when we most need it, a still small voice. Jesus coming again and again into our lives. As his followers, we are to be alert, continually on the lookout for his coming into our midst.

In Jesus continually coming to us, we are given strength and encouragement for the ministry he has called us to. To play our part in proclaiming his Advent, just as in ancient prophecies. We are to look at what is going on in the world around us through the eyes of faith. To not freak out at what we see. Or, as Jesus implies, that we are not to "faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world." Rather, we are to be interpreters of the events around us. To be watchful for the signs of hope and new life that spring forth, just as, in due season, the fig tree will bring forth signs of growth and new life. To be alert, through prayer and watchfulness, to maintain a faithful readiness for what is to come. Assured in our faith that the Son of Man will come with power and great glory. And in the meantime, being the ones who are called to continue to carry Christ's light into the darkness. To carry his message of hope to a yearning world.

As this time travel journey has shown us, the season of Advent which we begin today is about being willing to enter into the shadows of despair that Jesus foretells—the shadows of despair that we move in and out of through our own lives and through our own collective history. But all the while, awaiting his coming to bring hope, peace, joy, and love—the traditional virtues of Advent. We await his coming at his birth, which we celebrate in just over three weeks. We await his coming at the end of the ages, though we know not when. While we wait, we welcome the many and varied ways he comes to us in our day-to-day lives. And being willing to share his coming with those in need of his Advent, of hearing a word of hope and experiencing his love.