

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
9:00 and 11:00 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
The First Sunday of Advent – November 29, 2015

“In Bloom”

Scripture: Luke 21:25-36; 1 Advent C

Tell me, when have signs of the end like these that Jesus offers this morning not been a part of our human history? When have people not looked to the heavens for signs and despaired? When have the nations ever known a time without distress? Chaos seems never far from us in our own times. So where, then, is the end?

I believe the truth is these signs and portents are as perennial as the blooming of the trees, the wafting odor of the blossoms of springtime of which Jesus speaks. We are always at war or experiencing peace, we are always growing ill or being healed, we are always knowing disaster and knowing safety, we are always building up or tearing down. Spring comes and goes and comes again. We know this. The fact is, we are always being born and we are always dying; we are always awaiting our salvation, and we are always being saved.

Jesus is right: when we see all these things taking place, we know “...the kingdom of God is near.” And these things are always taking place, and so we know

that the kingdom of God is always near. But it is not always with great signs or disasters or prophecies or power that human beings know the Kingdom of God. Listen! Even now some new child is being born in obscurity, maybe known only to her mother and the few who attend her for the birth. Is God any less present to this child because there are no great signs in attendance at her birth? And how often have people watched at the bedside of some loved one as life slipped unceremoniously away? No great signs; no portents in the heavens at their ordinary deaths. But is the Kingdom of God any further from them because they died without the shaking of the powers of heaven? Perhaps it is in these ordinary events, these “sacraments” of birth and death, these “outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual graces,” that we are members of the Kingdom of God.¹

It is these very signs that Jesus shows through his life: he was born a child of human kind, he lived a life like our own, filled with struggle and uncertainty and also goodness and love; he died almost friendless and alone. Yet his life and death are become sacraments of salvation, because he was not overwhelmed by death, rather we proclaim *he is risen from the dead*, like new blossoms that grow upon the branches of the fig tree in the springtime. The only signs we really need, then, of the nearness of the Kingdom of God are these: that, no matter our circumstances, we live and we die in

¹ From an idea posited in Robert Farrar Capon, *The Parables of Judgment* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 144 ff.

faith that God is raising us to new life, that the blossoms are returning to the trees, that this world is being made new, while we seek to live in love and service with all people and with Creation.

The world is always coming to an end, and it is always being born. Watch for it; expect it. Don't be overwhelmed by fears or needs or desires or worries or doubts or anything beyond your control. We know what we are called to do in our time. There is a saying in the Jewish Talmud that goes like this:

*“Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief. Do justice, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.”*²

Maybe it's hard to believe that all things can be well in a world that is so distressed. But Advent heralds the birth of the baby in a manger and the return of the King of Kings in awesome glory. Jesus has already pronounced judgment upon the world through his willingness to be born, to live and to die among us, one of us, loving us to the very end, loving us into our new beginning.

² Quoted from Synthesis (a preaching resource) for Advent One, Year C 2009. The quotation is likely a compilation of Talmudic teachings, the first portion echoing the 6th chapter of the prophet Micah, the latter portion from Pirke Aboth, or “The Ethics of the Fathers” (sometimes called “The Sayings of the Fathers”) a collection of wisdom from the Jewish Talmudic sages.

The world is filled with trouble, no doubt. Each of us has taken some part in our share of evil or felt its sting in our lives somehow, somewhere. And when we see the signs of evil times, I don't want us to think for a minute that this evil is all part of God's plan. It is, rather, God's plan that evil be overcome by good. We are a part of *that* plan. The Church is intended to be a part of that plan. So, Jesus says, when people are shaken by fear and foreboding, when the nations are confused and distressed, when the seas and the waves roar, "...stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." Don't run to your room and hide for fear of the approaching judgment. Throw open your door and welcome the Kingdom of God, which may come as in the quietness of an humble stable, or in the struggle and fear of a troubled world around us, or in the personal cataclysm of a broken and contrite heart.

So, welcome to the season of Advent, a time when we remember that the Kingdom of God is near, always near. As near as birth, as near as death. As near as the return of the blossoms upon the trees in springtime.