

December 2, 2018
Advent 1C 2018
St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Sermon by The Rev. Patricia Green

“Begin with the end in mind.” When you go on a trip you determine your destination and the best route before you leave. Before you plant a garden, you plan it in your mind or sketch it out on paper: the corn over here, the green beans over there, the tomatoes on the end. If you are asked to give a speech, you create it on paper and put it on note cards before you give it. In his book, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey says that to know where you are **going** helps you to understand where you are **now** and allows you to choose steps that will move you in the right direction. So always begin with the end in mind.

If you ever go to a therapist, you might be asked to do an exercise where you imagine your funeral or write your obituary. When you see the end of your life you can decide if that is where you want to be or if you need to make changes. Kind of like Scrooge in Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. Once the ghosts show him the realities and possibilities, he is able to make a significant change to end up where he wants to be. If you ever go to a career counselor or life coach you might be asked to create a vision board that pictorially represents all that you want in your life or career. People find that meditating on that board helps to draw them to their goals. So always begin with the end in mind.

Stephen Covey may have discovered this principle in the calendar of the church. Today we begin a new year. Happy New Year's!! Not a new calendar year. Not a new fiscal year. But a new liturgical year. Today is the first Sunday of Advent. Advent means “coming to”. This is the season where we celebrate God coming to his people. You might expect to hear the familiar stories of Gabriel telling Zechariah about the birth of his son, John, or Gabriel coming to tell Mary about the birth of Jesus. But that is never how the New Year begins. The New Year always begins with Jesus teaching about His second coming and the end of time. We always begin with the end in mind.

Each Advent, in a three-year cycle, (Matthew, Mark and Luke) we begin a new gospel. This year we proclaim the good news as Luke understood and wrote it. Luke was probably a Gentile by birth, well educated in Greek culture, a physician by profession and a companion of Paul at various times. The message of this gospel was intended for the instruction of a man named Theophilus, as well as the instruction for those among whom the book would be circulated. It was written to strengthen the faith of all believers and counter the attacks of unbelievers.

Instead of beginning at the first chapter of Luke and hearing those birth stories, we jump ahead to the 21st chapter where Jesus is late in his ministry. It is only days before the Last Supper after which Jesus will be arrested, tried and executed. Jesus is teaching in the temple. He speaks of Another Day, when he shall come a second time. Unlike his first coming which was humble and unobtrusive, his reappearance will have cosmic and cataclysmic effects.

“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. Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

This text shouts at us: Danger! Scary times are coming! Our world as we know it will be shaken and destroyed. Amidst this bad news is the promise of hope. You will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud. So, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.

The word redemption (apolytrosis) occurs only here in all of the gospels. It occurs 7 times in Paul’s letters and twice in Hebrews. All passages taken together, this word carries the idea of releasing or freeing someone from bondage by the payment of a fee or ransom. In this particular discourse, it seems that the coming of the Son of Man will free us from the terrible distress that has come upon the world or it could mean that the Day of Judgment for the **world** is a day of release for **believers**.

As Advent arrives, we are reminded that despite our best intentions and efforts, there is still a need for God to redeem his world. We may feel confident that as baptized believers we have already received our redemption. We have been forgiven our sins and made righteous through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Yet our world continues to be imperfect and troubled. Just watch the news or read the newspaper. We have wars raging, fires burning, earthquakes shaking, storms that bring devastation, immigrant and refugee turmoil throughout the world. Mass shootings and violence of every sort. I could go on and on.

Our world is imperfect and troubled, and we remain imperfect and troubled. It is only on the Day when Jesus comes again in glory that the Kingdom of God will be complete. As Christians we long for this day. Some say: I am not concerned about going to heaven. I am concerned about my life now. Or I don’t want to be wo heavenly minded I am no earthly good. I am committed to social justice, evangelism, and environmental renewal. But ultimately only the return of the Lord Jesus can bring a new heaven and a new earth. At the

end of The Revelation to John, the writer concludes the New Testament with these words, “Even so, come quickly, Lord Jesus.”

Jesus tells us nothing about when this Great Day will come. He simply indicates that if we are watchful, we will not be surprised by it. “Look at the fig tree,” Jesus says, “you know that when trees are sprouting leaves that summer is near, so you will be able to look around and recognize when the Kingdom of God is near.” Indeed, the overall theme of Jesus’ words here is an exhortation to readiness. Jesus says, stand up, lift up your heads, see and know, be on guard, keep alert and pray. He warns us against “being weighed down with dissipations, drunkenness and the worries of life.”

Recently I was talking with another pastor and he was telling me of how stressed he feels, how he cannot take much more bad news, how his congregants complain of being afraid of what is happening in our culture and in our political leadership. He reminded me that the most prescribed medications today are anti-anxiety meds. This is what it means to be “weighed down with dissipations, drunkenness and the worries of life.” The opposite of being weighed down is to be awake or watchful, which includes praying at all times. How many people are too weighed down to pray? Not enough time? Too depressed? Too tired? Too numb to pray?

Jesus gives us another word of hope. “Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth **will** pass away, but my words **will not** pass away.”

What generation is Jesus speaking about? It could be that he was talking about his current generation. Telling them that the world as they knew it would come to an end when the Temple in Jerusalem is destroyed, (circa 70 AD) or he could be speaking of a future generation that would be alive when these signs happened. Every generation since Christ has seen some of these signs and claimed that their generation was the time of Jesus’ return. Yet we continue to live in the in-between times: between his first coming as a babe in a manger and his second coming in the clouds with power and great glory.

Luke shifts the question from **when** will this happen to **how shall we live** in the meantime. As a writer, Luke uses the technique of comparison and contrast to enlighten and motivate his readers. He says the Heaven and Earth will pass away, but Jesus’ word will not pass away. He compares the people who will faint from foreboding and those who will stand and lift up their heads as redemption is near. And he compares being weighed down with being alert and praying.

Are you a person of the **world**, filled with anxiety and foreboding, too weighed down to pray? Or are you a person of the **word**, filled with the promises of God, standing up and lifting your head watching for the return of the Son of Man in the clouds. Are you

surrounded by people of the world who grow faint with fear? Will you proclaim the message that every person needs to hear, the message of hope—your redemption is near?

Many generations have passed since Jesus foretold the end of the ages. Some get excited or anxious about the end of the ages and make all kinds of predictions, but most of us find it hard to sustain the anticipation of a surprise that never seems to come. Yet we like the disciples are called to keep watch.

How shall we keep watch? Henry Nouwen, priest and contemplative says: First, we watch together. As the church, we gather around God's promises. We support each other. We encourage each other's faith. Second, we watch with God's word in our midst. God speaks to us through the scriptures, sermons and songs and small group studies, personal reading. His word shapes us and fills us with anticipation and longing for the return of Christ. Third, we watch by being present and fully aware of the moment. We turn ourselves from distractions and sit quietly in communion with God. (Henry Nouwen)

Stephen Covey concludes his thoughts this way: "It is easy to get caught up in the busy-ness of life, to work harder and harder climbing the ladder of success only to discover it's leaning against the wrong wall. People often find themselves achieving successes that have come at the expense of things they suddenly realize were far more valuable to them. How different our lives are when we really know what is deeply important and we manage ourselves each day to be and to do what really matters most. If the ladder is not leaning against the right wall, every step we take just gets us to the wrong place faster. We may be busy but we will only be effective when we begin with the end in mind."