

Matthew 24:36-44
November 27, 2016

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!
Amen.

Welcome to Advent! The season of the church in which we prepare for the coming of the Christ child. After a long season of ordinary time in which we struggled through some challenging texts in Luke's gospel about the challenges and costs of being one of Jesus' followers we have been longing for some good news. Waiting for the Jesus of comforting words, pleasant smiles, and feel-good feelings to break into our midst and set everything awry in the world right once again. After a tiresome last few days for so many which may have included any or all of the following: cleaning the house, preparing a bountiful meal for many, family stress and drama, and of course the shopping so many of us embark on as we battle our way through crowds jockeying to get the "must-have" Christmas gift and best door buster out there we might come a bit weary this first Sunday of Advent. Perhaps, a bit on edge. Anxious about the cost of all that shopping. Worried about how we will have enough time between now and Christmas to get everything done on our mounting list of things to do. And so we come for some relief from everything else going on in our lives and for a Jesus "pep" talk. And instead we get yet another apocalyptic text in which Jesus talks about his second coming. He gives us an unveiling of what that day will be like and truthfully he gives us

no answers other than the fact we will have no idea when it will be. Even he does not know when that will be. Uffda! Where is the gospel (i.e., good news) in all this?

Advent is supposed to be about beginnings. It's the beginning of a new church year after all and yet, on this first Sunday, we get a text about endings. A text in which Jesus says the world as we know it will one day come to an end. Everything we hold onto in this world will be gone. All the powers that vie for first place and control will be wiped out. All those items we so desperately had to have on Black Friday – gone. All those Thanksgiving leftovers – a thing of the past. Everything will come to an end. Solemn news! Perhaps. Good news! Perhaps. I suppose it depends on the lenses we are viewing it from.

Endings can be so hard and for most of us we don't like to think about endings because it means we have to come face-to-face with difficult good-byes. We have to acknowledge change is inevitable. Life in our earthly bodies is not one of constancy. Endings have a way of forcing us to acknowledge our vulnerability, our fears, and open us up to a host of emotions we would much rather avoid. And thus on face value many of us might initially hear this text as bad news. So often our initial response to a text such as this is "why?" Why God? Why does the world as we know it have to end? Why can't you just wipe out all debt? Why can't you just eliminate sickness? Why can't you just eradicate evil? Why do bad things happen? Why must the world we know it come to an end?

Yet, perhaps we might rather view things through questions such as: “What now?” “How do we as faithful Christians live in light of this news?” “How might this ending be an opening to something new God is doing?” Perhaps, in doing so we might have eyes to see more clearly as Jesus does. We might be equipped by the Spirit with lenses to see endings sometimes have a way of birthing new beginnings.

Apocalyptic texts, such as this, aren’t always received as bad news. Take for instance this story told by retired Bishop Will Willimon of the United Methodist Church. He was in Honduras with a mission team working in a health clinic. One night as they were gathered together someone asked each person to share their favorite Bible passages. The traditional ones were lifted up such as John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that all who believe in him might not perish but have eternal life.” Or, 1 Corinthians 13, Paul’s classic love hymn heard at so many weddings. The good news seems so readily apparent in these two and others that were given; but, then the question stopped at a woman who responded by lifting up Luke 21. What in the world is Luke 21? It’s not on the tip of our tongues so don’t feel bad if you don’t have a clue what it pertains to. Luke 21 is another text in which Jesus gives a revelation of his second coming. In fact, we had it not so long ago. Recall his words about wars and insurrections, great earthquakes, famines, and plagues, divisions among families, persecution and martyrdom. This is good news? Well, for this woman it was. You see she was a nurse and already that day she had been present as 3 children under the age

of 5 had died from malnutrition. For her, the ending Jesus spoke of was indeed good news. It was hope for a better tomorrow. It was the promise of a new day in which there would be no suffering or death.¹ In the ending Jesus speaks of however and whenever it may come there is the promise God will do something new. Something extravagant. Something abundant. Something life-giving. Just as God did through the first coming of the Son of God. Just as God did through what the world deemed an ending, which was his death and the new beginning God raised up on Easter. Endings can be difficult. They can be painful. We might not ever know why they happen, when they will happen, or what they will look like. Yet, they can in fact be wonderful news which lead us to a new beginning God is ushering in.

As we embark on an ending to one church calendar year and the beginning of a new one might we take a brief pause in the midst of our time together, to sit patiently, quietly, breathe deeply and reflect on some of those endings in our own lives and the beginnings which God might have worked in them revealing we are never alone and growing us spiritually into a richer and fuller relationship with God.

¹ Bishop Will Willimon; www.asermonforeversunday.com