

Sermon
Advent One
St. Andrew's, Methuen
November 28, 2021
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Jeremiah 33:14-16
Psalm 25:1-9
1 Thessalonians 3:9-13
Luke 21:25-36

Imagine when you entered church today you were handed a pencil and a piece of paper and asked to write down your intention for this worship service. What is your intention?

A few folks' only intention is to go from page 355 to 365 in the prayer book, sing some hymns, hoping it doesn't take over an hour.

Others come with the intention of seeing their friends and conducting any business of their church committees.

Many clergy intend that the service go decently and in order, so that the acolyte lights the candles in the right order, the lector reads the right lesson, and the LEM doesn't drop a cruet.

Others come with the intention of praying to God to stop all the change in their lives. They want things to go back to the days before Covid and social and political unrest. They want God to be the "Rock of Ages, cleft for me".

They want to sing the old hymn, "**Change and decay all around I see, thou who changest not, abide with me.**"

Indeed, today Jesus warns the disciples that there is a lot to worry about on the horizon. N. T. Wright says that after Nero's suicide in the year 68, four emperors followed in quick succession, each one at the head of an army. He says a "convulsive shudder went through the whole known world", which fits verses 25-26 in our gospel reading today---where Jesus says, "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....for the powers of the heavens will be shaken."

Jesus is saying that if the current generation decides to reject his Kingdom Way of forgiveness, non-violence, and forming an inclusive community and instead embraces retribution, violence, and

persecution of the outsider, then Rome will come and lay waste to the city and the Temple, which is exactly what happens in the year 70.

Jesus says, "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with the worries of this life and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap."

Covid continues to bring the whole world into just such a moment of fear and anxiety, so that "dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life" threaten to overwhelm us all.

But, here's the thing, Jesus would have us face, not run from, the fundamental instability of our lives. Look at the fig tree, he says, as its leaves pop out in summer, for it bears witness to the reality of change. **The only tree that doesn't change is a dead tree.**

If our intention is to secure our life when we come to church, then we are actually fighting against God and living against the grain of the universe. And instead of bringing us peace, this struggle to stop the flow of change will exhaust us, as we struggle against what is.

Jesus agrees with the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus who said, **"You can never step in the same river twice".**

Every moment of the last 13.8 billion years is a flow of evolutionary change, so the fundamental question for us is are we going with the flow or going against the flow? Are we moving with the River of Life or resisting it?

So, in speaking about the coming wave of conflict Jesus is being loving and pastoral. He wants us to give up the illusion that we can make life certain and fixed.

I like the way James Taylor expresses this in his song "The Secret O' Life":

The secret of life is enjoying the passage of time.
Any fool can do it, there ain't nothing to it.
Nobody knows how we got to the top of the hill.
But since we're on our way down, we might as well enjoy the ride.

"The secret of life is enjoying the passage of time."

Sounds easy--but it isn't. I look every day on my dresser at the picture of me and my three brothers with my sister at her wedding 25 years ago.

We're all smiling—but her husband would die in a few years as would my oldest brother a few years after that.

As another great old hymn says, "Time like an ever rolling stream bears all our years away".

Therefore, this First Sunday of Advent, the first day of the new Church Year, is a good time to ask ourselves, what is my intention for my worship?

This is a central question, because if you aim at nothing, you'll hit it every time. We will default to that place where our hearts are weighed down with dissipation and the worries of this life."

At this past diocesan convention on Zoom a woman asked, "What's an example of a good intention?" And I shared the clear and powerful intention that I learned from Thomas Keating, the monk who helped create Centering Prayer, who says when we begin our worship to make it our intention "**to surrender to the presence and action of God**".

To make it our stated intention "to surrender to the presence and action of God".

To trust God is to surrender to God's presence and action in our lives.

 Jesus can go to Jerusalem to challenge the powers and principalities of sin and darkness precisely because he surrenders to the presence and action of his loving Father. He shows us that as we let go of our death grip on "my" life, we will find the life God has for us.

 In worship--Sunday after Sunday in church, day by day in our personal worship, we practice surrendering to the presence and action of God.

This week one candle, next week two, then three and four and then at on Christmas Eve we light the white candle in the middle—which is exactly the place Christ meet us and calls us, not to stand still but to follow him through time riding the flow of the Spirit, the River of Love flowing though us.