
People Will Faint from Fear and Foreboding!

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A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam G. Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
The First Sunday of Advent-Year C
Luke 21:25-36

"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." (Luke 21:25-28)

Every year about this time, I feel I owe an explanation to people who are new to the Church. I don't mean new to just any church-but to the classical Christian Church, the old one, the one that has been steadily struggling in this world for almost two thousand years. I mean churches in the orthodox, classical tradition, who say the Nicene Creed and who follow an established seasonal pattern of bible readings every week. I mean our church, The Episcopal Church.

I know it seems different in here this morning. I know that, just last week, we were lazily observing Thanksgiving and the warm occasions of family and food. I know that many of us are now getting ready for Christmas, and our houses are decorated, and we have trees and mistletoe up. I know that many of us are still recovering from the dramatic SEC championship football game yesterday.

During this crowded season of family expectations, and of all manner of attempts to be happy and fruitful, and of all kinds of over-served parties and preparations, I am honored that you are in church today! Maybe you are hoping that church will have something cozy and heartwarming to help you in this pre-Christmas season journey.

Instead, you get this: "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 fainting from fear and foreboding" (Luke 21:25-26). In here, in the Church, it's the First Sunday of Advent, one of the most counter-cultural of our Christian seasons.

Yes, counter-cultural. The culture around us, quite obviously, wants us to be happy and gay, to buy presents and decorations this way and that. And we like doing that, most of us do. It's a fun season. I kind of wish I had my Christmas tree already up!

But, like she always does, the Church in her wisdom advises preparation before celebration. The Church counsels reflection before mayhem. Like many sports, the Church advises a preseason before the regular season.

Advent is the preseason. The season of Advent, the four Sundays before Christmas Day, is the time for self-reflection, for a renewal of strength and identity, which will make Christmas all the merrier. Essentially, that's all I need to say today, especially to those who are new to the classical Christian church. We are in preseason mode here; we have learned, over time, that preseasons help. Prayer and preparation ahead of celebration make for healthy people. It keeps us alert and

astute.

Thus, our gospel lessons during these four Sundays ahead of Christmas always show us how other people have imagined the coming of God. Obviously, at Christmas, we will observe the birth of Jesus-the coming of God!-into our world. It helps us, therefore, to consider how people before us have imagined how that coming might occur.

And on this First Sunday of Advent, we remind ourselves that for a lot of human history and time, people have imagined the coming of God in some dramatic, and scary ways, even some violent and crazy ways. *"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,"* says Saint Luke (Luke 21:25-27).

Many of the ways that our ancestors imagined the coming of God turned out to be wrong. In fact, in every generation, there are those who believe they are living in the last days, right then and there, that Jesus is returning on such and such a particular date; and the coming of God will soon overturn everything. So far, they have been wrong every time.

Or have they?

It may be that, in some mysterious way, we are always living in the last days. After all, Jesus did say, "This generation will not pass away until all things have taken place." I believe he meant that each of us, in every generation, undergoes the experience of things passing away, and of the earth being reborn, and of ourselves being reborn, by the coming of God.

The season of Advent reminds us that things are always being shaken and distressed and overturned. Yet, Jesus says that those times are also times of redemption. The kingdom of God is near, he says. So, the kingdom of God does not appear just in a lovely little stable manger of nostalgia. The kingdom of God is near when things are being shaken and overturned, too. It takes some preparation and some history to see this; it takes some sturdy preseason practice.

The Church is here to provide that sturdy preseason practice. We say our prayers and sing our preseason songs like football players do their calisthenics and practice their snaps before the actual game. We know the plays in our heads (most of us do), but we need those plays to become habits in our souls, something like muscle memory in our souls.

And what is the game? What is it that we Christians are actually preparing for? Amidst all this other hoopla and decoration and cultural drama, what is it that we hope for? What do we want to see?

I believe, at heart, each of us wants to see the coming of God. We don't call it that, usually. But we do call it love, and we do call it peace. We want something of God's love and peace to be so very present to us.

Advent, and the First Sunday of Advent, reminds us that sometimes we are prevented from noticing the coming of God because of our own fear and anxiety. We see all the signs""in the sun, the moon, the stars, the earth""that look a lot like chaos and confusion; but we fail to notice that redemption is always drawing near even in those events.

What we miss, so often this time of year, is the ability to notice: the ability to be alert, the ability to stand strong.

In each of the gospel accounts which discuss the dramatic second coming of Jesus, whenever that is supposed to be, the key admonition of Jesus is something like: "Be alert." Or be watchful. Stay awake. It is the "being alert" that leads to strength.

Be alert! And you will see the coming of God in all sorts of ways, even now, before Christmas, and even during times that look like chaos and confusion. The rest of the world will be fainting from fear and foreboding; but Advent Christians are awake and alert.

I smile when I hear that phrase, "fainting from fear and foreboding." It reminds me of a wonderful story, told by one of the great story tellers of our time. Sadly, he died about twenty years ago, way too soon. He was a Jewish rabbi and a family systems therapist, and I believe he knew more about fear and anxiety than almost anyone I have ever met.

His name was Edwin Friedman; and, often, he taught by using parables""just like Jesus did, actually. In stories, he was able to teach us how to be alert, how to maintain strong identity in a world of fear and anxiety.

Listen to this story, my abbreviated version of his parable on the falling dominoes:

Once upon a time (Friedman writes), there was a long line of dominoes, standing close to one another, and circling back finally upon itself. Every now and then, one would shake, but generally they stood, careful not to start any dreaded, unstoppable chain reaction.

But then one day it happened. A single domino teetered, shook, and fell flat upon his neighbor. The dreaded process began. Confusion and chaos. Hundreds of dominoes began to fall, all on top of each other. Friedman writes that the anxiety became so great that some even fell before the wave arrived. Their fear and foreboding made them fall before the wave even hit them! (That's where I apply Luke 21:26 - "people will faint from fear and foreboding!")

Well, each domino pondered and calculated how he might hold up, or push back, his neighbor when the wave would finally come! But inevitability prevailed. Hopelessness reigned.

When suddenly, suddenly things stopped. They stopped with such resounding force, that at first the cumulative energy pushed backwards and created a ricochet. Then the wave went backward, all the way back around the system until the last one fell against the other side of the one domino that did not go down. Still again, the process reversed itself, this time milder, so that the dominos ended up straight back up again!

The entire episode happened quickly. "What happened?" they all asked. They turned to the one domino who had not fallen. "How did you do it? What formula did you use? How did you calculate the proper measure?"

*"I'm not sure what the difference was," said the domino that had not been dominoed. "All I can say is that while each of you kept trying to hold your neighbor up, my concern was that I did not go down." (for the exact parable, see Edwin Friedman, *Friedman's Fables*, New York: The Guilford Press, 1990, pp. 175-178).*

That's the end of the parable. Ed Friedman later wrote down the moral of this parable. What is the moral? He said: "Put your own oxygen mask on first."

What do you do when someone in your family panics? What do you do when someone in your own family complains too much? When someone is causing trouble? What do you do when the whole world around you seems out of control with fear and foreboding, and falling and fainting all over each other?

Ed Friedman's parable reminds us to say our own prayers, put our own oxygen masks on first, practice in the pre-season of Advent, learn to be alert at all times. Then, the waves of negativism and defeat actually stop with you. The wave of anxiety stops with you. You do not need to fall down in despondency.

In those moments, the kingdom of God has come very near to you. The kingdom of God does not arrive when we act just as despondently and carelessly and drunkenly as the rest of the world, falling all over each other in our anxiety. The kingdom of God arrives when we have the courage and alertness to stand up strong.

Listen again to this gospel for today, and its final words:

"Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man." (Luke 21:34-36).

"Be alert," says Jesus, "Stand," and this pre-season of Advent will be an occasion to see the coming of God.

AMEN.

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