

Anybody notice anything different in front of the State House lately? How about at the store? Or on the radio? Or in your inbox? 'Tis the season to be dreaming of a decking of the halls in a winter wonderland with a Holly Jolly Rudolf and a Frosty Mr. Grinch. 'Tis the season for shopping, cookie baking, present wrapping, workplace holiday parties, and the annual diatribes about the *reason* for the season or keeping Christ in Christmas.

These are the days when we get ready for Christmas celebrations and there is a lot to do. All of this is meant to celebrate the first coming of Jesus Christ, as a baby, in a manger. Yes, there's a lot of commercialization around Christmas that our dear friend free-market capitalism has given us, but for the most part, the things we do to prepare for Christmas Day are great ways to honor that holy day of Christ's First Coming.

But it's not yet Christmas. In fact, there's a whole nother season before Christmas, and that is Advent. The Season of Advent begins the church year (so Happy New Year) and it comes alongside our preparations for the First Coming and reminds us to also be preparing for Christ's Second Coming. Now, we know that Christmas is December 25th. (And that we also celebrate the Christmas season for 12 days after the 25th.) We can prepare for this specific date and season but then it comes, it goes, and then the Valentine's Day products come out.

But what about the Second Coming when the world will “see the Son of Man coming in a cloud”? When is that and how do we prepare for that? Well, as we discussed a couple weeks ago, we don’t know a specific date or time and we are foolish to try to predict Jesus’ Second Coming. But as Jesus says in the parable of the Fig Tree, “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.”

The Fig Tree represents the Temple in Jerusalem which Jesus knows will be destroyed by the Romans before this generation passes away, and it was. The other trees are the rest of the nations that rise and fall, and they did, and they will. When we see these things happening, we know what’s coming next, but we also know that the kingdom of heaven is near.

Again, it’s been 2000 years and the Son of Man has not yet come in the clouds. And many, many generations have felt that their days were the last days. But the truth is... today *is* the last day... for today. Today is the only day that we have. Yesterday is gone; tomorrow’s not here; all we have is today and it is coming to an end. Sure, we will probably all wake up tomorrow and the next day and the next day. But the truth is, at one point or another, we won’t. Our “today” will be our last “today.” And one day, the same will be true for heaven and earth *as we know it*.

But, Jesus says, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”

Today we are seeing signs galore of what feels like the end of the ages. There is distress among nations. There is roaring of the sea and waves. And people are fainting from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world. That even has a name now... “Climate Anxiety.” It is crazy out there. But the truth is... it’s always been like this. It’s different today, but it’s the same. Things have changed, but it’s the same broken world that Jesus came into 2000 years ago and it’s the same broken world he will return to on the Last Day.

Jesus’ coming into the world, the Incarnation, is not about presents and cookies and carols. It’s about the fact that God loved the world so much that God came to be fully with us in the muck. Jesus, who we call Immanuel, God-with-us, didn’t come into a perfect world to live with perfect people. He came into a broken world to die for broken people.

We will not perfect this world on our own. We have only to look at the history of the world to know that truth. But, I believe that when we accept that there is no “perfect tomorrow” then we can have a “holy today”. We can see the signs around as calls to be awake and alert to human suffering and misery, to hatred and violence, to sexism and racism, to addiction and illness. And then respond with Love. To those signs of death, we can say that there is another sign--The Incarnation,

the Light of Jesus which brings Peace, Love, Joy, and Hope to this world. We celebrate that First Coming at Christmas and we prepare for Jesus' Second Coming now, remembering that heaven and earth may pass away but Jesus' words, and his love, will never pass away.

And so, I want to extend an invitation to you. This is not to yet another holiday party or craft sale. This invitation is to go deeper in your spiritual life this Advent in a specific way. I want to challenge you to read the Gospel of Luke between now and Christmas Eve.

Why Luke? First, it has the story of Jesus' birth we're accustomed to. Second, it's the gospel we'll be reading the rest of year in the lectionary. And third, it just so happens that Luke has exactly 24 chapters, which means you could read a chapter a day and get it done. Reading one chapter of a gospel takes between five and ten minutes. That's it. Of course, like any good book, you might find that you want to read it in large chunks, or even all at once! And like any good book, the more attention you give it and the more you talk about it with other folks, the more you get out of it. However, you do it, I challenge you to do it, to read the gospel of Luke between now and Christmas Eve.

So, in the midst of the hustle and bustle of Christmas prep and the fear and foreboding in our world right now, I offer this invitation to set aside some time to reflect on Jesus' everlasting word. I can't promise it

will be easy--either finding the time or hearing what you hear--but I can promise that if you do this, you will grow, and you will be blessed.

And I promise to do the same my self, so if you do this, too, you can come talk to me about it. Or see if your pew buddy is doing it and you can meet up outside of church for coffee, or eggnog, and talk about the everlasting word in Luke and how it is changing your life because that's what we're here for. Not just gifts, and carols, and pageants but for our lives to be changed by the love of God in Jesus Christ, who came into this world to love us with a love that will never pass away.

Amen.