

**Christ Episcopal Church**

**2 Emerson Place**

**East Norwalk, Connecticut**

**The First Sunday in Advent (C)**

**December 2, 2018**

**“Is it the end, my friend?”**

**A Sermon by the Rev. Joe Parrish**

**The Holy Gospel according to**

**Luke 21:25-36**

Jesus said, “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.” Then he told them a parable: “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. 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. Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day 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.”

Dear Lord, fill us with your Holy Spirit that we may not fear any or all.  
Amen

A friend of mine has posted this on the [i-church.org](http://i-church.org) website for Advent:

May this eternal truth be always on our hearts:

that the God who breathed this world into being,

placed stars into the heavens

and designed a butterfly's wing

is the God who entrusted his life to the  
care of ordinary people,

and became vulnerable that we might  
know how strong is the power of Love.

A mystery so deep it is impossible to  
grasp.

A mystery so beautiful it is impossible to ignore.

(courtesy of John Birch on Faith and Worship)

<http://www.i-sanctuary.co.uk/advent13/>

[the following is from an earlier draft:]

Make us ready, Dear Lord, for we seek your coming again. Amen.

In around 1694 a cult of the “Woman in the Wilderness” spent their time each night sitting on their roofs with telescopes looking for signs from heaven to announce that the end of the world was about to take place.

In 1836 William Miller predicted the end of the world would be in 1843. When nothing happened, his followers became skeptical. But when a comet appeared in the heavens in 1844, the ranks of Millerites, as they were called, ballooned to 50,000.

A man predicted the end of the world would be 1874, and gained a following called, “Jehovah’s Witnesses.” The prediction was revised to be 1908, then 1920, then 1925, then 1940, then 1975, and finally the Jehovah Witnesses adopted a new policy that says they will no longer try to set the date for the End of Time. Today we see many of them often in several New York Subway stations bidding us to think on end times.

In the Year 2000, a group of 500 people in a trailer park in Texas were disappointed about their prediction that

nuclear bomb explosions would end the world on October 13, 2000. [C. Edward Bowen in Sermon Mall]

The topic of end times is one that has fascinated more than a few. But so far, no one has had much success in their predictions. As we read the apocalyptic predictions Jesus made, as recorded by Luke's gospel, we note that we followers of Christ are not to "faint from fear and foreboding", but we are to "stand up and raise [our] heads because our redemption is drawing near." And then Jesus uses the figure of trees coming into leaf. The

End of Time for Christians will be a hopeful sign like the coming of spring or summer.

Several years ago my family and I were in Ormond Beach, Florida, for a family reunion. During the night a silent tidal wave came into the beach below us four feet high, possibly due to a distant offshore earthquake or sudden shift in the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean. We never heard the wave and only learned about it the next day and saw the remnants on the sandy beaches. Imagine if we had been walking on the beach in

the dark of that night as we sometimes did! The unexpected tidal wave surely would have caused us great alarm at the very least!

These predictions of “the roaring of the sea and waves” and “signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars” are indeed ominous sounding. A modern mind would see some sort of universal calamity that was taking place. Recently astronomers said that a galaxy that had once been thought to be the farthest object in our universe was instead some three million light years closer. And at

one time the farthest object was a black hole about twelve million light years distant. However, today, we know the universe is about 600 billion light years across, and in the middle of every galaxy there is a black hole. A black hole distorts all the light waves near it, sort of sucking them into itself, as well as the all the matter of galaxies, suns, and even planets eventually. The resultant tidal waves and roaring of the seas as our sun spirals into the black hole of the Milky Way would be quite similar to what Luke's gospel is predicting. Black Holes

are relatively invisible because they do not give out light but in fact absorb light. The actual end of everything we can see will indeed happen one day. Of course, a near collision with a black hole is one of many possibilities that could make the apocalyptic visions of Jesus come true quite quickly. In a few years a huge asteroid will pass between the earth and the sun. A wobble in its orbit could be catastrophic for Planet Earth.

But what are we to do to be ready? If the end of time does not come say in the next hundred years or so, it will be our

own biological death that ends our personal time on earth. Are we even ready for that much more predictable future? Have we put our faith in Jesus as our Lord and Savior?

This new season of Advent, representing the second coming, or return, of Christ to earth, has begun. In Advent we will for a couple of weeks focus on the End Times, and then more on the First Coming as we head into Christmas when we celebrate Christ's coming to earth as a baby. So, we have a tension between the yet to be and the

already. The Last Day is yet to be, but Christ has already come to live with us, and we will celebrate that about three weeks from now. If nothing else, that will raise our anxiety that perhaps we are not really ready for Christmas yet!

Every mall's sound system has Christmas carols already blaring on their sound systems, not realizing that the dire predictions of Advent always precede the celebration of the birth of the Christ Child.

I, for one, am not ready for Christmas, so I am glad to have the

“buffer season” of Advent. But the world will not let me sit in silence and contemplate the Second Coming of Christ for long. The television shopping stations want us to remember there are only 23 days until Christmas, and to buy, buy, buy!

But can we take just a few minutes to reflect on what the whole season of Advent should mean to us? Advent is a time of preparation, spiritual preparation, for the inevitable end of our life and even the end of all life. Advent urges us to be circumspect about our priorities. If

we have not resolved to make it to church each Sunday, now is the time to so resolve. You know Advent is the New Year for the Christian Church.

January First is only a pagan holiday that we have tried with little success to blend into the Naming of the Christ Child as a Holy Day. But Advent has already begun, the true beginning of our Christian year. And given that we have entered a new year, what would we want to do this year that we did not do last year? Now is the time for some Christian Advent or New Year's

resolutions. What about making a pledge, maybe even a tithe, ten percent, and resolving to keep that pledge? What about getting active on behalf of someone needing our help this year? What other resolutions can we think of? Do make those resolutions today, and this week, because that will add a sense of order to our life and give focus for our Christian living for a whole year.

A poll by Newsweek magazine found that twenty percent of Americans think the world will end in their lifetime, and six percent think the Apocalypse will

occur this year. How close is destruction? A few years ago, a stork, the big bird mythically associated with human births, built a nest in a set of power lines in Portugal that completely interrupted the electricity in the capital city of Lisbon and throughout the entire southern half of Portugal. What can happen in an instant is amazing. When computer viruses are launched in Singapore, they can disrupt a myriad of huge computers around the world in less than a day. What happens in one part of the world no longer is benign in another

part of the world, if it ever was.

Someone has noted that during the Twentieth Century there were three thousand wars. Imagine if wars begin to spill over into our land as quickly as computer viruses can travel. Now twelve thousand people are starving to death each day somewhere in the world. This concern has led us to redouble our efforts to get groceries into the hands of the neediest in our community. But, of course, we need your help by making your pledge for next year. We are one of a very few real lifelines of help and hope

in our community. Statistics show that even though the unemployment rate has diminished, a huge number are still unable to support their lives by work. It may be better than it was in the Great Depression, but too many lives still teeter on economic collapse.

An elderly person came to me and said their next SSI check would be the last, and they wonder how they will survive. Their entire check next month will go to their landlord to pay their rent. What will they eat? She is only one of millions of legal immigrants who will

not be able to get into hunger programs for working families. They are too old to work, and they do not speak more than a few words of English. What are their chances?

A visitor came to a zoo and thought he was witnessing a sign of the end times. He saw a cage with the sign “Peace,” P-E-A-C-E, outside. He looked inside, and to his astonishment he saw a lion and two lambs. He ran up to the zoo keeper and said, “This is amazing! A lion and lambs living together! This is like something out of the Bible. How

did you make it happen?” The zoo keeper responded, “It’s not quite as amazing as you might think. We go through a lot of lambs each day.”

When I was a youngster I read a book by Nevil Shute called, “On the Beach,” printed in a daily series by our local newspaper. It was a depiction of a nuclear holocaust in which all of Europe and America had destroyed each other, and only Australia was left inhabitable. But even that continent was doomed as the nuclear cloud slowly made its way around the earth. It was an ominous look

at what humans were then capable of. But even that scenario, that has had multiple incarnations in other modern books, is more modest than what is envisioned in our gospel lesson for today. A nuclear holocaust on earth will not likely affect the sun or stars. It is a universal phenomenon that is being predicted in today's gospel text, one of far more power than any manmade nuclear contraption could possibly do. Such movements in the stars could not be manmade or produced by any other than God. We are talking about the true

end of everything. But still we are to look up and see our Savior coming in the clouds. We will be finally vindicated, finally redeemed by our Lord. It will be a glorious, yet terrifying time.

A religious commercial on television said on the screen: “Jesus is coming soon—perhaps tomorrow. Send \$10 right away for tapes that explain the second coming of Christ.” And then it added at the end, “Please allow six weeks for delivery.” It seems their sense of urgency was somewhat diminished!  
[C. Edward Bowen in Sermon Mall]

But on the bright side, think how great our celebration should be to welcome back the King of Kings and Lord of Lords! Christ is coming back soon. Let us be ready. Amen.

## Description:

Advent celebrates the end of time and of things, but not of hope. When Christ is our rock, all other worries pale. We are to put our hope in the Eternal Son, not on the passing universe.

Tags:

End, times, Christ, Jesus, God, Holy,  
Spirit, galaxy, star, sun, earth, planet,  
black, hole, asteroid, Advent, Sunday,  
New, Year, resolution, pledge, tithe,  
religious, Christmas, carols, Australia,  
lion, lamb, zoo, second, coming,  
destruction, catastrophic, Portugal,  
apocalypse, hunger, unemployment

**St. John's Episcopal Church**

**61 Broad Street**

**Elizabeth, New Jersey 07201**

**The First Sunday of Advent (C)**

**December 2, 2012**

**A Sermon by the Rev. Joe Parrish**

**“Hang on there”**

**DRAFT**

**The Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus**

**Christ according to**

**Luke 21:25-36**

Too much worry leads us away from you, Lord Christ. Still our hearts this Advent season that we may hear your voice and know we are the sheep of your pasture. Amen.

Is not December just a very busy month--buying presents, sending invitations, finding ways to greet others during this holiday season with Christmas cards, etcetera, etcetera? But for the Church itself, we have three major observances this very week—the

First Sunday of Advent (today), the Feast of St. Nicholas (December 6), and the Concepcion de Maria (December 8).

Most churches will chose Advent One today, but, with the weightiness of the other two festivals this week, we felt beholden to observe all three today! So welcome to a somewhat schizophrenic Sunday!

Later this week I am going away to a far land to be the voice of St. Nicholas at a church in Hawaii. Three stories are told about him, two of which are PG, the third is R, so cover your children's ears

for that story. St. Nicholas was a priest in Myra, in what is today, Turkey. He was trying to give some money to the poor of his town, so he took three vessels from the church sacristy, took them to a shopkeeper, and had them converted into gold and silver coins which he threw out of the church window to those starving beneath. The shopkeeper who converted the three vessels to coins, hung out a sign with the three vessels on it to offer them for sale, and later he did sell those vessels; but to show that that shop would convert goods into money, the

shopkeeper put out three brass balls in their place—thus, so the story goes, was created what we now call a ‘pawn shop’! The second story is that Nicholas was a merchant who was trying to feed the poor children in his city. He went to the port of Myra and found three ships at dock there. One had wheat from North Africa; one had raisins from Greece. And a third ship had nuts from Italy. He convinced each ship captain to give him a tithe, ten percent, of their cargo and promised them that God would make up the difference when they came to their

port of their destination; and indeed, each ship was miraculously restored whatever it had given for the poor children. Nicholas took the wheat, the raisins, and the nuts and made delicious cookies for all the children in the town. The third story involves Nicholas in seeking candles for the church altar, and to his dismay he discovered that the wax had been obtained from some poor children's bodies. Yes, that's an R rated story. He convinced the wicked candle maker to cease using children for his unscrupulous goods and to use lard from

pigs instead. Thus, Nicholas is credited with saving the lives of many children. All three stories have the theme of benefactions to the poor and the children of his town. And so, the giving of gifts to children on St. Nicholas' Day is a tradition in a number of countries of the world; apparent that gift giving eventually began to be associated in other countries with the birth of Christ; hence "Santa Claus", or "Saint Nicholas"! How he became jolly, old, fat, wearing red with white cotton cuffs, and a gift giver to children is from some later

revisions of those earlier stories about St. Nicholas.

Not to leave the world of gift giving in the hands of Nicholas, we have the observance of the Concepcion de Maria, virgin mother of Jesus. This is a very important and obligatory feast day in the Roman Catholic church who to this day sees her as 'ever virgin'. But the Protestant church translates the biblical verses about her as having sons and daughters, so not 'ever virgin,' just a virgin at the time of Jesus' birth, as is said in the Creeds of the church. That

Mary is the holy “bearer of God”, all Christian churches agree on, however.

And artists depict her with a halo looking over her new born son in the manger.

We doubt that even Jesus had such a halo, however; it is instead the way the artists try to point to the holiness of someone in a picture. Probably if Jesus actually had a halo in real life, he would have scared the lost sheep away!

(Pointing to our ‘Good Shepherd’ stained glass window beside the altar.)

So, let us just say that ‘artistic freedom’ is being used here.

The third ‘reason’ for today is that this Sunday begins the new church year. Today is New Year’s Day on the Christian church calendar, not January 1. And to celebrate today we always begin with gospel lessons that speak of the Last Days, the eschaton, warning us that the Lord will one day return to earth from heaven to ‘judge the living and the dead.’ And on that day the “powers of the heavens will be shaken.” And “there will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars.” And there will be “distress among nations confused by the roaring

of the sea and the waves,” much like there was in New Jersey and New York at the recent land fall of Hurricane Sandy. So even that hurricane is predicted as a sign that the Last Days are upon us. Sandy, however, was only a fourteen foot tidal wave; we should be expecting far worse some day we cannot predict, just as we did not correctly predict the size of Sandy. Sandy was only a Level One hurricane as it came ashore; can you imagine what a Level Five hurricane would have done? We would have been flooded right here in

the middle of the city of Elizabeth. Or at the very least, being on one of the highest points of town, we would have become an island with nowhere to go from here, without a boat.

One of the brief reports I heard during Sandy was that there was a thirty-seven foot wave in New York harbor, presumably below the Verrazano Bridge which is two hundred and twenty-feet (228) feet above high tide; but a wave thirty-seven feet tall reaching any New Jersey or New York shore would have been far more catastrophic than anything

we actually experienced with a thirteen point eighty-five (13.85) foot ocean surge. But a Category Five hurricane is not that far from possible, and its destruction should it come ashore at high tide would have been perhaps ten to a thousand times more destructive, perhaps in the half trillion to fifty trillion-dollar range, probably enough to sink the entire United States financially.

One of our clients at the Red Cross headquarters where I served as a disaster chaplain earlier this week was distraught about losing everything during the storm

surge; and upon reflecting on how ‘things’ can seem to be controlling how we are valuing our lives and setting our goals, it became apparent that things are not in the end all that important. When my parent’s home burned to the ground in nineteen hundred and seventy-three (1973), killing my father in the smoke from the blaze, our mother’s life was far more valuable than the two cars that exploded or the pictures that were destroyed or the home that was left in ashes. When we are faced with true destruction, we reorder what we value in

life. And indeed, we reorder what we value in the life to come. It was in that context that I saw my life leading in a way that was too transient, and God moved me to rethink what I really valued most in life. Ultimately, I went to seminary and became the Rector of St. John's Church here in Elizabeth, New Jersey. It has been quite a 'ride'! Not one I would recommend to the faint of heart, however. We are after all the 'stomping ground' of the FBI's most wanted drug kingpin, as the Wikipedia article about Elizabeth, New Jersey,

notes. So, it is no wonder that drug arrests are the number one reason for the thousand percent increase in the census of the County Jail across the way from us since nineteen hundred and eighty-nine (1989); the number housed there has gone up from a hundred to thirteen hundred and fifty in twenty-three years. Ninety percent are there are there because of drug charges.

One biblical commentator noted that the birth of Christ did not save anyone. Instead it is Christ's death and resurrection that save us who believe he

is God's only Son. And even should a Category Five storm hit us with a forty-foot surge, we can still be assured of Christ's hand in the life of all humanity. But we have to grab that hand of Christ. We have to cling to it as though it is our last hope, which it most definitely is. For with Christ we have everything. Without Christ, we have nothing.

Amen.