

November 28, 2021 – The First Sunday of Advent

We have been here before.

Luke presents for us at this beginning of Advent an ominous projection of the end.

But the words of Jesus that will not pass away contain in them the echoes of what has come before and the assurance that remembering brings.

A vision that starts with signs in the skies to come is tempered by the sounds of the seas.

Sea imagery has been popping up a lot lately in our lectionary readings. In poetic psalms and prophetic visions alike. The sea is always powerful but always subordinate to God's power. In Revelation's Chapter 21 vision of a new heaven and new earth, the sea is even "no longer," which maybe doesn't sound so great to those of us who value the views of the strait, the inlet, the capes, the bays.

But it's a vision *not* of demanding our destiny is a dry desert. It's representative of putting another bookend on creation. As God created out of chaos, the Hebrew *tehom*, the primordial ocean deep, ultimately God will bring all creation completely into order and chaos will be eliminated.

It's coming. But in the Advent spirit, we wait.

We wait with the belief that God is greater than the very real distress and destruction that comes and goes from our perception, but has always remained no farther than right around the corner or right underneath the surface.

Signs may appear in the cosmos but they also show up in our backyards. Buds on the trees tell us something, as does frost on the grass. These things are familiar and comforting.

But we are also familiar with the discomfoting. With the tree that withers and no longer buds or blossoms. We see such a thing and know there's only so much we can do. We

take the appropriate measures, the pruning, the propping up, the plying with a little more sun or a little less, a little added shade or a little taken away. Sometimes it's enough to extend a little life but most times, it's not. And something that brought a little joy to our lives is gone.

That's never the way we want it to go but it happens. And we plant new seeds. And we tend to the other greens. And the blooms and the busts alike prepare us for what comes next.

Whatever may come, we *rise* to meet the day. "If I knew the world was to end tomorrow, I would still plant an apple tree today." Contrary to popular belief, Luther didn't say it. But nonetheless, that little nugget of wisdom proved itself valuable. Scholars point to its circulating in the Confessing Church of the German Resistance during the Third Reich. The closest thing to Armageddon modern times have known.

For all the evil unleashed across those years, in the end, it could not and would not prevail.

The Church could have folded. And in some sections, sadly, it did. But we are left with the testimony of the lives of faith lived by Christians like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Franz Kaufmann who were martyred and Martin Niemoller and Helene Jacobs who survived their time in prisons and concentration camps. We are inspired by those who stood up in the face of such trials and endangerment. And we learn from their examples that to be one who holds their head high in the face of a world crashing down, it flows more naturally from standing up for what is right and good before circumstances become dire. From an active waiting that still seeks the better in the face of the very worst.

“The blessedness of waiting is lost on those who cannot wait, and the fulfillment of promise is never theirs. They want quick answers to the deepest questions of life and miss the

value of those times of anxious waiting, seeking with patient uncertainties until the answers come,” Bonhoeffer wrote. “They lose the moment when the answers are revealed in dazzling clarity.”

Bonhoeffer’s last act was the liturgical equivalent of planting a tree. He conducted a final Sunday service at Flossenburg concentration camp before being taken away to the gallows. An English prisoner Payne Best carried forward Bonhoeffer’s last words to him: “This is the end – for me the beginning of life.”

We should all hope to be capable of such courageous faith ... and hope also never to have to it so painfully and brutally tested. Be on guard. Be alert at all times, the words of Jesus resound. And they may fall on our tired ears.

Tired of anxious waiting already as we enter into a season focused on that waiting. It’s understandable in the time and in the world we live in. But it’s not an exercise we

undergo alone or in a vacuum. Christ has drawn us into community to be a body, his body, to be strength for one another to draw on when we need it. It's much more manageable to be alert at all times as a body than as a whole bunch of scattered individuals. We are stronger together.

Bonhoeffer knew that. He wrote his book *Life Together* about the value of Christian community, based on his experience in the underground seminary of the Confessing Church. He drew his courage and strength from his brothers in Christ, with whom he shared the same convictions amidst the same oppression.

In community, we benefit from the experience of our fellow Christians, those who have been through struggles we might not have come up against yet ourselves. Those who have been there before when we haven't.

**And we wait together in a position of holy strength.
Heads lifted high as we do. Because we can be assured that
as a body we stand, not alone, but as one in Christ.**

Amen.