

In the name of our one God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

On this first Sunday of Advent, it is tempting to let our minds gravitate toward thoughts of the joys of Christmas to come. The first candle has been lit on the Advent Wreath. The occasion follows right on the heels of the Thanksgiving celebration we just enjoyed and it's a little bit hard to switch gears. Maybe the scholars who laid out the lectionary had that in mind when they chose the texts for Advent. Just when your mind has begun to think about all the magic and pageantry of Christmas, the lectionary brings presents us with a chilling text.

I have often wondered about the rationale for using the cryptic and borderline creepy texts that talk about the end of human time. Why, when we are looking toward celebrating the birth of the Prince of Peace do we need to talk about turning our world upside down? It catches us off guard. And maybe that's the point. We are caught off guard when we need to be at peace with the possibility of our own finitude.

At the time of Jesus' birth, the Hebrew people were feeling off guard. They were feeling perplexed and confused over the fate of their nation. The future, in fact, looked very bleak for them. Their temple worship was being challenged. They were physically under the domain of an empire that demanded complete devotion and obedience to the rule of the emperor. They were fearful that God would abandon them unless they strictly obeyed temple commands. Jesus was born into this time of anxiety and time of crisis of faith. Many sects of Judaism had emerged by the time he made his first appearance at the manger in Bethlehem. There was division over which sect had it right; the Sadducees, the Pharisees, the Essenes, the Zealots? Who could help them make sense of all this madness?

In times of crisis, the people of Israel looked back. They looked back into their history and back into the sources of their tradition. In times of crisis they pored over the apocalyptic texts of Job and of Daniel, looking for any inkling they could find for hope that God was working to fulfill the promises made to his chosen people. In times of crisis, it is natural to try to find a way out. Apocalyptic literature was one of the resources they relied upon to help guide them.

For us to get a sense of why they chose that route, we need to understand those terms - apocalypse and eschatology. Apocalypse refers to an unveiling, a lifting of the veil; in this case, concerning the ultimate fate of humanity. Eschatology is the study of the last days, the end of human history. From a Christian perspective that means the end of human history where God's kingdom will come to fruition on earth. It's the study of the time when life as we know it would be turned upside down, which (as our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry says) is actually right side up. But making that turn from upside down would seriously rock our individual worlds. Our lives would not be the lives we enjoy today. The thought of end times makes us all anxious because we cannot imagine the reality of it. Like the ancient Hebrews we find ourselves feeling enormously uncertain.

When you are in the midst of a crisis, it surely feels as if the world has been turned upside down. And I think this year in particular we can get a good sense of what that time of crisis must have felt like in Israel. After the election we just experienced, our system of government has been thrown a curve ball. We have never been in a situation like this before as a nation.

Today, our future is far from certain. In ancient Israel, the Hebrews' system of faith, their system of temple community was being challenged. *Their* future was far from certain. It was into this very kind of murky insecurity that God sent Godself into the world. Jesus, God's son, was born in Bethlehem. Through knowing his story we know that he was born not just for the Jewish world but for all of humanity. Can Jesus be the one who can guide us out of our insecurity? Can we call upon Jesus to show us what we must do in this time of waiting?

We cannot be sure what we are waiting for. The Hebrews thought they knew. They expected a warrior king like King David to bring sovereignty back to their nation; their nation in which government and Judaism were intricately bound. Jesus was not what they were looking for. Could it be that God has something unexpected in mind for us? What must we do while we wait for God's will to be revealed?

In the gospel reading from Matthew, Jesus' disciples were hoping to understand how to carry on after Jesus' death. They were filled with anxiety and uncertainty. This was a new kind of crisis of faith for them. He told them he would come again into the world and they wanted to know exactly when that would be. They didn't want to get caught unprepared. After all, they knew all too well what had happened to the folks who ignored Noah. They had ignored Noah's warnings and gone about their lives as if there would be no end. But there was an end. They were caught completely unaware by the flood. Jesus' disciples were not going to let *that* happen to them. They were prepared to wait for Jesus' return... but they wondered how long the wait might be? What should they be doing while they waited? Should they just hole up in the temple and pray unceasingly? So they asked him. Imagine their frustration and irritation when Jesus told

them that no one knows how long it will be, not even Him. Only God knows how long.

There was no answer for them then. And there is no answer for us now. Not the way we like to have answers. But human beings being the curious animals that they are, and some having enormous pride and intelligence, decided that wasn't good enough. These folks try to calculate the exact day and time of the end of human history. When one date turns out to be in error, they just go back to the drawing board. We all know how that has gone. Others folks have chosen instead to reinterpret the meaning of the end time. They've decided that final judgment must come at the end of EACH INDIVIDUAL human life instead of waiting for an all at once rapture like experience.

And then there's the interpretation these last days that I tend to prefer. I tend to think that the symbolic language Jesus used came directly out of the Hebrew tradition. They were images that he and his followers would be very familiar with. He used these images so that they could readily understand. He reinforced the notion that speculating over the precise end for human history was, and still is, futile.

Jesus' insisted that we cannot know when all this will end. So I conclude that speculation is not a fruitful way to spend the precious moments of time we have in this life. Instead, the important thing for all Christians and other God believers is to focus on God's claims on our lives. It is urgent that we respond to those claims right here and right now.

So what are we waiting for? In the Advent season, we are given the opportunity to wait in a most productive way. We are waiting for the day that commemorates the birth of Jesus. But aren't we waiting for more than that, too? Aren't we waiting for our hearts and minds to be ready to make the most of what his birth represents? We can

prepare ourselves to receive God's greatest gift of grace. Jesus modeled the kind of active waiting that will prepare us.

Active waiting for his life to consummate in God, his father, is what defined Jesus's life. Jesus lived out his ministry knowing that he was going to die. He did not know when and he did not know how. He did not know how or when God would redeem that death but he knew that God *would* redeem that death by raising him somehow some way. He trusted God completely. We don't know how or when God will redeem our lives but we know through Christ that God *will* redeem our lives.

Jesus demonstrated his trust and hope by working faithfully each day on behalf of God's kingdom. He was fully aware and awake regarding his eventual fate. He asks that we engage fully in life in complete awareness of our ultimate end, too. We can do that. Jesus calls for us to be faithfully present in each moment as we respond to God's claim on our lives. He assures us that if we do what we can on behalf of humanity and all of God's creation that will be enough.