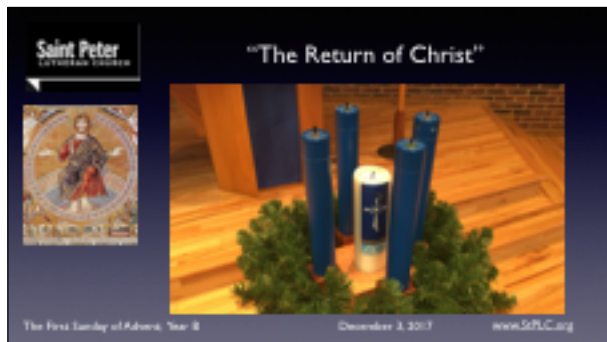


Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. And from all of us who are committed to liturgical worship: Happy New Year! (I was going to see if I could borrow a couple of Deb's noisemakers from last Sunday, but thought that might be a little over the top...)

This Sunday, of course, begins a new season in the church calendar. Advent is a time of making our hearts and homes ready for the coming of Christ at Christmastime. It is a complicated and in some ways dissonant season. While society around us is celebrating the Holiday Season with parties, open houses, school festivities, shopping, and a nonstop barrage of Christmas Carols and secular Christmas songs... the church invites us to enter into a spirit of Advent waiting, preparing and anticipating.

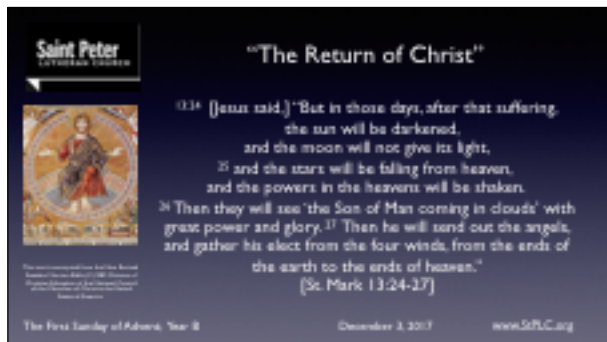


This waiting is often marked with an Advent Wreath — a display of four candles, one lit each week. As the light from the wreath grows, we mark our journey towards Christmas.

This time of waiting and preparing and anticipating takes three shapes — past, present and future. We turn our attention to the Hebrew Scriptures, and spend time with Ancient Israel as they waited for the coming of the Messiah. We enter into disciplines of prayer and worship and service, as we prepare for Christ to come into our hearts in new and vibrant ways today. And we anticipate the promised return of Christ to bring this world's story to an end, and reunite us all with the God who created us.



This third aspect of Advent—the promised return of Christ—is a recurring theme in the Bible. Inferred in books like Isaiah, Joel and Daniel in the Hebrew Bible. Specifically promised in New Testament books like Acts, the letters of the Apostle Paul, Hebrews and Revelation. This promise is a feature in all of the Gospel accounts — specifically here in this weekend’s Gospel lesson from St. Mark.



The sun will be darkened. The moon will not give its light. The stars will be falling from heaven. The powers in the heavens will be shaken. They will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory.

It is an image both frightening and hopeful.

During certain periods in the history of God’s people, this has been a profoundly helpful message. There have been times when it has seemed, to believers, as though all the forces of the world had been turned against them. We remember the people of Ancient Israel, held against their will, captive in Babylon. We think of the early Christian church, brutally persecuted by Emperor Nero and his armies. These were desperate times. Believers clung to God’s promise with all their might. It seemed that the world was in such a bad state, that the only hope was for God to sweep into this world, tear everything down, and start all over again.

5

Saint Peter
CATHOLIC LITURGY

"The Return of Christ"

ἀποκαλύπτω
(apo-calypso, or apocalypsis)
to "draw away the veil"
to cause something to be known
to reveal or disclose

The First Sunday of Advent, Year B December 3, 2017 www.SPLC.org

In these kinds of times, apocalyptic messages from God can be deeply inspiring. Apocalyptic writings are a specific genre of sacred text that seek to draw back the veil that prevents us from seeing into the future. They remind us God will have the final say. The forces of evil will be defeated. Truth and justice and righteousness will prevail. The journey might be dangerous and uncertain, but God's people are encouraged to have hope, to stay strong, and to know that in the end all will be well.

These writings may sound frightening in our relatively comfortable times, but that was never their intent. They aren't designed to somehow scare us into believing, so that we'll be included when the day comes. They are, instead, an invitation for us to watch and wait and prepare ourselves for the powerful arrival of God's presence in this world. They are, ultimately, intended as a word of hope for those who trust in Christ.

6

Saint Peter
CATHOLIC LITURGY

"The Return of Christ"

13:24 [Jesus said:] "But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. 25 Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. 27 Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven." [St. Mark 13:24-27]

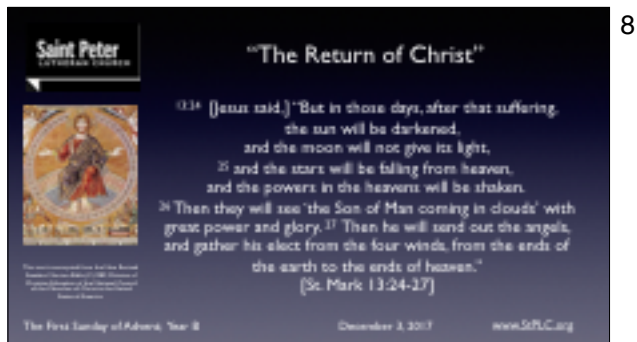
The First Sunday of Advent, Year B December 3, 2017 www.SPLC.org

Our Gospel lesson this weekend comes from what has been called "The Little Apocalypse of Mark" — a short passage where Jesus speaks in apocalyptic language. These words were a source of hope for his disciples when the situation became difficult for that first generation of Christian believers. They became even more important around a.d. 70, when the Gospel of St. Mark was written — about the time when the Roman armies destroyed the temple in Jerusalem. For believers who often had to risk their lives to tell others about Jesus, the reminder that he promised one day to return in power and glory helped them to persevere. This part of the story is well documented.

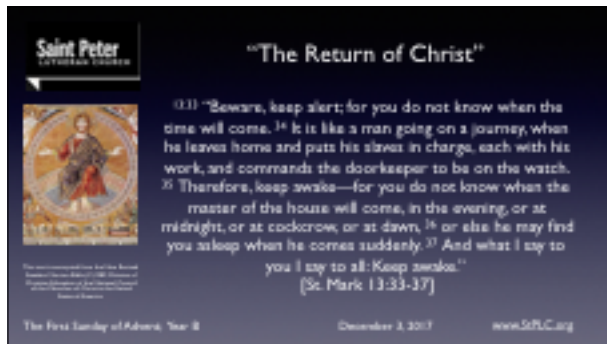
The question for us is: how might these be helpful words today? How can they become a source of hope and inspiration for our faithfulness? In a time when we are relatively safe and secure, and able to worship and witness as we choose, what in our lives



Our lives may not be at risk, but life in this world is never assured to be easy. When we scan the weekly prayer list here at Sant Peter, we are aware of those who face health challenges, who have lost loved ones, who are between jobs, who struggle with difficult family relationships. When we pan out a bit, we are aware of the challenges our state and nation face. This week has highlighted national budget issues, and the concern about economic stability. In these post-9-11 days, the security of our country — even of our world — is often on our minds. Natural disasters have been front and center a number of times this past year. The constant reminders of violence in our world are hang over our heads like a dark cloud. Political divides in Denver and D.C. make us wonder if our leaders are capable, any more, of working together in a way that moves us forward in a healthy way. Issues having to do with race, gender, and class divide us.



Our lives may not be at risk, but there is ample reason to be concerned about the future. And when this is the case, these words of Jesus are meant to come to us as a source of comfort and hope. No matter how difficult our situation might be, our God promises to have the final say. The trials and challenges of human community will come and go, but the promise and presence and power of our God is forever.



So what do we do? Jesus teaches us to pay attention. To stay awake. To not let the chaos surrounding us take our eye off the ball. This is what the season of Advent is for. It is a reminder of how important it is for you and me to draw near to God on a regular basis in prayer and worship. To ground ourselves in the Word of God, and the promise God makes to accompany us through all times. To gather for support and encouragement. To become a vehicle through which God moves to make the world a better place. During this season, we heighten our commitment to these practices. Daily prayer and Bible study. Weekly worship. Fellowship with other Christians. Service to the community. These Advent disciplines are not only a gift to us during the month of December. They are the practices that carry us through every day of our lives, and allow us to live amidst pain and disappointment with hope and joy.



Will Christ return in the clouds, with great power and glory, during our lifetimes? As Jesus says, nobody knows the answer to that question — not even the Son of God or the angels in heaven. But is the presence of God in our lives a source of strength and hope and peace for today? Absolutely! Is our attention to these Advent disciplines a way to give faith a more prominent place in our lives? Absolutely! Is the community that we experience here at Saint Peter a way for us to ground ourselves in the promises God has for us? Absolutely. This is the purpose of Advent. May your faith, and our life together, be a source of strength and hope and peace for you this year, and every year. A good Advent to you all. Thank you for joining us on this journey towards welcoming Christ into our hearts and our homes.

11



Take It Home!


Let's keep the conversation going. Our hosts will have a 7-day devotional guide for you as you leave today.

Question for this evening's conversation: "How do I understand the promised return of Christ to this world?"

The First Sunday of Advent, Year B December 3, 2017 www.SPLC.org

As you leave today, our hosts have a 7-day devotional for you. Let's spend the next couple of days reflecting on this morning, and preparing ourselves for next Sunday. Tonight's question is, "How do I understand the promised return of Christ to this world?" Not a bad place to start.

12



The Last Word

"Thy kingdom come."

What does this mean? To be sure, the kingdom of God comes of itself, without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may also come to us.

How is this done? When the heavenly Father gives us his Holy Spirit so that by his grace we may believe his holy Word and live a godly life, both here in time and hereafter forever.

[Martin Luther; Small Catechism (1529)]

The First Sunday of Advent, Year B December 3, 2017 www.SPLC.org

We've been studying Luther's Small Catechism between the services lately. In his explanation to the Lord's prayer, he offers this explanation to the second petition:

"Thy kingdom come."

What does this mean? To be sure, the kingdom of God comes of itself, without our prayer, but we pray in this petition that it may also come to us.

How is this done? When the heavenly Father gives us his Holy Spirit so that by his grace we may believe his holy Word and live a godly life, both here in time and hereafter forever.

Luther reminds us that God's kingdom will come, but our Advent hope is that it will come to us; that in the midst of our messy, broken lives, the kingdom breaks in, and we experience grace and hope.

13




Hymn of the Day

Please stand as we sing today's Hymn of the Day.

1st Service: *The King Shall Come* (page #15)

2nd Service: *Your Light Will Come, Jerusalem* (page #15)




The First Sunday of Advent, Year B December 3, 2017 www.SPLC.org

Please stand with us as we sing today's Hymn of the Day.


1st Service: *The King Shall Come*
(page #15)

2nd Service: *Your Light Will Come, Jerusalem*
(page #15)

14



St. Mark 13:24-37 (slide #1)



13:24 [Jesus said,] "But in those days, after that suffering,
the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light,
25 and the stars will be falling from heaven,
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15

Saint Peter
LITURGICAL LECTURE

St. Mark 13:24-37 (slide #2)



28 "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. 29 So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. 30 Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. 31 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. 32 "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

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December 3, 2017 www.SPLC.org

The First Sunday of Advent, Year B


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32 "But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

16

Saint Peter
LITURGICAL LECTURE

St. Mark 13:24-37 (slide #3)



33 Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. 34 It is like a man going on a journey when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. 35 Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, 36 or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. 37 And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake."

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The First Sunday of Advent, Year B

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