**The Day of the Lord**

When I first read these lessons over, my first reaction was: what on earth can I of make of these? They seem all too strange, terrifying, even foreboding. What do they have to do with me, or with us? Or is this some sort of over-the-top biblical nonsense that we can all ignore?

Today we begin again the great liturgical cycle that will move us through the year, from Advent, this season of expectancy, to last Sunday of the Church’s year, Christ the King when we look to that end of time and the fulfillment of all things, when Christ will come to reign. Today is a beginning. Even a new beginning, as we gather to wait and watch for the coming of the Lord, in the person of the Babe of Bethlehem. Advent is also a time when we wait for the coming of God, just as parents wait for the birth of their child. Like them we wait with eager longing, mixed, I am sure with fear, dread, and curiosity, as to what this child will mean for them and their lives.

But Advent is not simply a time of waiting for the birth of the child. It is not simply a time for waiting for the beginning of a life. It is also a time when we wait, indeed when we long for the end of time, and the fulfillment of all things. So, we wait today, as we do every day, not just for the beginning, but also for the end, not just for the coming of God as saviour, but also as judge and redeemer of all, at the end of time.

So, Advent is a time of waiting, and like any parent waiting for the birth of a child, we do so with eager longing, and a sense of dread, because this child, like every child, will change our lives, and demand from us things that we cannot even begin to imagine. We wait too, perhaps with a sense of fear, because we know that this birth, like every birth, will be hard, and painful, and may even, literally, tear us apart.

Childbirth, at least at one time, was both life-giving, and life-threatening. This birth for which we wait is no different. It will both give us life and threaten the life that we have come to know, for by it we experience both our beginning and our end. We see in it both manger and cross. We know from it both salvation and judgment. We find in it both the beginning of all things, in the birth of the child of Bethlehem, and the end of all things, in Christ, the Judge of all.

Advent is about hope and dread, longing and fear, salvation and judgment, our beginning, and our end. It is about the one who *for us and for our salvation . . . came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit … became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man*,[[1]](#footnote-1)and the one who *will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and [whose] kingdom will have no end.[[2]](#footnote-2)*

So what then, are we to make of these lessons? Are they some sort of prediction about the future? Are they telling us what is **going** to happen? Or helping us make meaning out of what **is** happening?

Some may be familiar with that school of biblical prophecy that makes predications about the future, telling us what **will** happen. I remember being swept up in the 1970’s by Hal Lindsay and his bestselling book ***The Late Great Planet Earth***. In it he predicted, not the collapse of the Soviet Union, but its world domination and role in the rise of the anti-Christ. Clearly that did not happen.

So, what is happening here this morning? The lessons are telling us not so much what **will** happen as they are trying to make meaning out of what **is** happening.

*In those days and at that time[[3]](#footnote-3)* Jeremiah tells us, and we must ask *what day?* What *day* is Jeremiah talking about? Jeremiah is pointing us to no other day than *the day of the Lord* when God’s kingdom will be established here on earth, when God’s kingdom will come *on earth as in heaven*, when all creation will groan with birth pangs at the birth of the kingdom of God,[[4]](#footnote-4) just as a mother groans in the midst of her labour.

And that is my image of Advent. It is a time of labour when all creation groans with Mary, as she gives birth to the Christ child. At the same time, creation groans as it gives birth to the reign of God. It is labour pangs, not chaos or destruction that we read about in today’s lessons. It is labour pangs that cause people to *faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming[[5]](#footnote-5)*. It is labour pangs that *shake the powers of heaven*.[[6]](#footnote-6) It is labour pangs that cause signs in the sun, the moon and the stars.[[7]](#footnote-7) It is labour pangs that confuse the nations by the roaring of the sea and waves.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Jesus and Jeremiah speak not so much about natural destruction, as they do natural phenomenon. Childbirth is a painful process, but it is a natural. Can the birthing of something so great as the kingdom of God be any less painful, or even natural? The labour pangs which accompany childbirth are no less sudden, sharp, and evident, as those which accompany the birth of the kingdom. Just as a mother watches and waits with longing and expectation, and perhaps some fear, so too do we who watch and wait for the birth of the kingdom. We do so with equal longing, expectation and even fear.

For a woman, the signs of childbirth can be read in her body. For us, the signs of the birthing of the kingdom of God are read in scripture, and in the world around us.

You only have to read the newspaper to know that we live in a painful time. Itw as true also for Jesus, Jeremiah, and Luke before us. But this time, like their time, and indeed all time, is not lost time. It is God’s time. It is *kairos* time. It is the appointed time.

Look at the fig tree[[9]](#footnote-9), Jesus tells us, and we will know the time when summer has come. Look at a woman, and we will know the time when her child’s birth has come. Look at the world, and see that God’s time is being fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is breaking in upon us.

Just as in the early days of spring when we strain our eyes to see trees breaking into bud, and a woman longs for the signs of childbirth, so too do we stand up and raise our heads and stretch out our hands,[[10]](#footnote-10) eagerly straining forward into the kingdom that is being born around us.

Now is the time, Jesus tells us. The kingdom of God is not only coming one day, or someday, it is breaking in on us now, here, today. Look, says Jesus, the kingdom of God has come.

Like any birth, this time, this *kairos* time, this appointed time, this day of the Lord, is a painful time, and so the world, like Mary is groaning in labour pangs as she and we give birth to our saviour, redeemer and judge.

Childbirth is a messy, painful, even a scary and dangerous process. It is this process we begin once again as we enter Advent, as we look forward both to the birth of Jesus as the babe of Bethlehem at Christmas, and also to the birthing of the kingdom of God around us. Like Mary we know the time for this birth is approaching, because all creation is groaning in labour pangs.

These lessons today are indeed strange and terrifying, bet they are not over-the-top biblical nonsense that we can all ignore. Rather they are pointing us all to the coming of God, not just as the Babe of Bethlehem, but also as saviour, redeemer, and judge of all, in time and at the end of time.

**Date:** 5 December 2021

**Lectionary Year and Proper:** Advent I, Year C

**Solemnity or Major Feast Day:**

**Occasion:** 1720 Project

**Place:** Monastery of Saint Mary and Saint John

**Primary text(s) to link:** Jeremiah 33: 14 – 16; Luke 21: 25 31

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1. Episcopal Church, **Book of Common Prayer**, page 358 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., page 359 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Jeremiah 33: 15 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Romans 8: 21 - 23 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Luke 21: 26 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Luke 21: 25 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Luke 21: 29ff [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Luke 21: 28 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)