

*In the name of God, Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit.*

"There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world."

And with those words, happy Advent, everyone!

Now, I must admit that I was feeling slightly grumpy about having to deal with this reading from Luke today – this apocalyptic message, these words about fear, foreboding, and distress. I felt like I had pulled the short straw.

Because really, wouldn't it be nice if Advent were just a preview of Christmas joy? A time for baby showers for the baby Jesus and early Tidings of Comfort and Joy? After all, the rest of the world seems ready to move immediately from Thanksgiving into Christmas pleasures, with carols already on the radio, special deals on peppermint coffee, and bright lights already lit, many more than just that little flame on today's Advent wreath.

But as Christians, we are invited into a different kind of season in these weeks leading up to Christmas.

The texts we read *every* year on the first Sunday in Advent include apocalyptic messages. They tell us in various ways to look for signs of destruction and distress. They all speak of fear and foreboding. You can't enter into Advent in the church without wondering and worrying about the future.

In today's Gospel reading, Luke invites us to look for signs of what is coming. Look for them in the moon and stars. Look for them in the distress among nations. Look for them in ourselves, in our own forebodings.

Now, it's not all that hard right now to look for signs of destruction, is it?

As I wrote this sermon, I opened the home page of the New York Times.

Distress among nations? Check: headlines about countries building up nuclear arsenals; about genocide in the Horn of Africa; about migrants trapped on the border between Poland and Belarus, and between Mexico and the United States.

Signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars? Check: climate catastrophe displacing people around the world and threatening entire island nations.

Breathless from fear and foreboding? Check: another record week of COVID cases in Minnesota, and hospitals at capacity.

Things that weigh down our hearts? Again, check: school shootings, arson at synagogues, and all those things in our own lives that don't make the headlines but that can feel to us like ominous signs.

The *easy* part of the instructions from today's Gospel is to look for signs of distress. The signs are neon, flashing, and impossible to ignore.

The more difficult challenge for us as Christians is to see these signs not as predictions of a gloomy future, and not as reasons to hunker down and live in fear. Rather, the challenge for us in the Advent season is to live into a new kind of hope and a new kind of promise, one that goes so much deeper than any of the preseason promises of Christmas cheer.

Because just as Luke invites us to look for signs, he also asks us to respond to them in a surprising way. He tells us to “stand up.” “Now when these things begin to take place,” he tells us. “Stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

Advent is an invitation to a radical kind of response in the face of a frightening future. It invites us to take these signs not a prediction of some bleak end over which we have no control. Advent asks us to think of them as an indication of God’s presence with us, and of our hope and commitment to a new future, one marked by justice, mercy, and love. Advent invites us into a hopeful posture, one where we look up and out to new promises and possibilities, not down and in to our own anxieties and fears.

The late Peter Gomes, the Harvard professor, theologian, and preacher gave an Advent sermon called “The Courage to Hope.” I read this sermon every year on the first Sunday of Advent. In it, he writes about the complicated kind of hope that we as Christians strive for during this season.

He writes:

*“Advent hope, my friends, is meant to be the sobering antidote to false Christmas cheer ... Advent is not celebration but fortification against the very forces that would drive us to despair and drag us downward.”*

Let's turn back to the news then, back to our lives, back to the world around us, this time with an attitude of Advent hope, standing up and looking for God’s presence and redemption in the world.

Let's stand up and look at the work being done at St. John’s and among other churches and communities of faith to welcome Afghan refugees and help them build safe, stable, and secure communities in this country.

Let's stand up and look at the nurses, doctors, and teachers, in the pews next to you and throughout the world who, despite their fatigue, continue to go to work each day to care for those who need them with patience, kindness, and compassion.

Let's stand up and look again at the newspaper. And this time, let's notice the photo of the teenage Minnesotan at the climate summit in Glasgow. She is out in the streets, demanding more aggressive action to save the world from climate catastrophe. Her fist is raised. Her look is determined. And she is smiling.

Each week as we light another candle on the Advent wreath, I invite you to reflect on what is giving you the courage to hope in your own life. On what is fortifying you against the desire to creep away into fear. On what is making it possible for you to stand up and, with others, to look for God’s promise of a better and more hopeful future.

*Amen.*