

Sermon for the First Sunday of Advent, December 2, 2018

Solemn Mass

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year C: Zechariah 14:1–9; Psalm 50:1–6; 1 Thessalonians 3:9–13; Luke 21:25–36**

Scholars know that around the end of the ninth century or the beginning of the tenth century monastic workshops began to put the prayers and lessons for Advent Sundays at the front of the new liturgical books which they were making.¹ Scholars do not know why they did this, but because of the way books were laid out, Advent began to be thought of by Christians in the West as the beginning of the church year.

But the prayers and lessons that were attached to these Sundays were not about beginnings or looking forward to Christmas but about the end of the year and the end of all created things.² The first part of today's gospel from Luke is the historic pre-Reformation gospel for the First or Second Sunday of Advent.³ It continued to be the Prayer Book gospel for the Second Sunday of Advent until the current Prayer Book was adopted.

Now we hear this passage once every three years, and the passage now includes Luke's conclusion to Jesus' last public words while teaching in the temple in Jerusalem: "Watch at all times, praying

¹ Adolf Adam, *The Liturgical Year: Its History & Its Meaning After the Reform of the Liturgy*, trans. Matthew O'Connell (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1981), 28.

² Paul F. Bradshaw and Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Origins of Feasts, Fasts and Seasons in Early Christianity* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011), 167–68.

³ Massey H. Shepherd, Jr., *The Oxford American Prayer Book Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), 93–94.

that you may have strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of man.”⁴

I will be tempted three years from now to include the first part of this last teaching, where Luke’s Jesus speaks prophetically about the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, which happened roughly thirty-five years after Jesus lived, roughly ten to fifteen years before Luke wrote. If we read the whole passage, one can see how Luke shifts his narrative from prophecy about the past to how believers should act in the present and in the future, when Jesus who had come as a child will come again with “power and great glory.”⁵

Most of you know I grew up Southern Baptist, but my father’s family was Roman Catholic. I learned a great deal about the Bible growing up, but the only verses I remember memorizing from the Revelation to John were the words: “ ‘I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”⁶ I don’t think I knew the difference between prophecy—Isaiah and Jeremiah predicting the fall of Jerusalem—and apocalyptic—imaginative visions of the end of time—until I went to seminary. Today’s appointed gospel is apocalyptic—imaginative visions.

Yesterday I spent ten minutes listening to what turned out to be the video of an interview on the problems for leaders, bosses, who work with the generation known as the “millennials”—people

⁴ Luke 21:36.

⁵ Luke 21:27.

⁶ Revelation 1:8.

born in 1984 and for a while after.⁷ The speaker generalized that their parents had failed to introduce a sense of purpose into their lives. And because parents had failed, it was up to the corporate world and the government to help them learn that they could matter.

The video website is called “Fearless Motivation.” If you search that website for the word “millennial,” you will find the video and the news that more than 250 million people have at least clicked on it. The friend who sent me the link is Hindu. He sends things that often are religious and not just Hindu. I kept listening with growing sadness to what I think is called by some a “first world problem.” There was no mention of God, faith, or religion, or even ethics and morality. I think the speaker was missing something essential.

When I was in seminary, the late George Bush was vice president, and President Gerald Ford was alive. I recall meeting a priest there who had been associated with both of these men’s families across his years of ministry. Both men were credited by him with being regular members of an Episcopal parish—Sunday School teachers, vestry members, ushers. People who took their turn. And their families were regular in attendance.

When George Bush was president, he often let a reporter get into his car with a camera on Sunday mornings to ride the very short distance from Saint John’s Church and to the White House—one way to keep the interview short. I remember in particular one interview when he had a palm in hand. Ford and Bush were both

⁷ <https://www.fearlessmotivation.com/2018/08/30/simon-sinek-quotes-leadership/>, (accessed 1 December 2018).

men of faith, and it mattered for their families and for their lives that they were practicing Christians.

As I listened a little to the news coverage of President Bush, I found myself wondering how younger reporters, who are part of a generation largely without an experience, conviction, of faith, are able to understand what a difference faith makes in human lives.

One final thought. The Greek word that is translated as “watch” in the phrase, “watch at all times” is more literally, “no sleeping”⁸—I know it only means “watch” in English, but the vividness is really good.

Let me finish with words in Luke that are more familiar to me from Matthew, but this is the parallel from Luke: “And do not seek what you are to eat and what you are to drink, nor be of anxious mind. For all the nations of the world seek these things; and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, seek his kingdom, and these things shall be yours as well.”⁹

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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⁸ *A Greek-English Lexicon of New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. “ἀγρυπνέω.”

⁹ Luke 12:29–31.