

“What We Choose To Emphasize”

Text: Luke 21: 25-36

Preached December 3, 2006

Rev. Benjamin Broadbent

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As Advent approached this year, I thought back to my first Advent here in Colorado Springs, here at First Congregational Church; and I remember how I came in and was excited. I had lots of ideas and proposed to Pastor Jim White that we shake things up a little bit during Advent.

Raise your hand if you remember the red lion. The man with the dark wings. The white winged ox. And the green eagle. These four creatures come from the Book of Revelation. They are the creatures that surround the throne, and their colors come from the four colors of the horseman of the Apocalypse. And so that Advent, instead of three purple and one pink candles, we had a red, a black, a white, and a green, and a yellow, I think. That was one of those liturgical ideas where in a January reflection Pastor White and I sat back and said, “Yeah, what were we thinking?”

So, no, I am not resurrecting these images as our theme for this Advent. In fact, I actually thought of a potentially worse Advent theme.

Recently, for my birthday, I was given a de-motivational poster. Now, you’re familiar with the motivational posters that are in offices – courage, endurance. Well, this de-motivational poster – I’m sorry it’s not larger, but it depicts a beautiful scene, twilight sunset over a river; beautiful colors; a little sliver of moon and sky; and the word under the picture is “Despair.” And the phrase beneath Despair, “It’s always darkest just before it goes pitch black.”

No, that is not our theme in Advent of 2006, so breathe easy church, breathe easy. Our theme is father “hope,” and even better said by the poet, Adrian Rich, “My heart is moved by all I cannot save. So much has been destroyed, I have to cast my lot with those who age after age perversely, with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world.”

There are at least two strange things about Advent. One is that it is a time of celebrating with light and celebrating expectancy and hope. A light coming into the world, and yet it is held at the darkest time of the year, the time of the year when the days, each one, slip away into darkness.

The second strange thing about Advent is that while we are preparing and expecting birth, it comes at the time of year when we consider the end of time, the end of all things. It is the time of the year when time itself doubled

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back, where we realize that life is lived in circles, not just on a trajectory, straight into the future. It double backs on itself.

Last Sunday, “Rein of Christ” Sunday, is the Sunday when we – sometimes it’s the only Sunday when we even read the Book of Revelation. Well, this Sunday, in the lectionary, are these words in the Gospel of Luke. It’s apocalyptic out of Jesus’ own mouth. What is apocalyptic? The word means revelation. More nearly, it means that the veil that is normally keeping us from seeing reality, as it is, is pulled aside, and the world is revealed to us anew.

And so the question is, on this first Sunday in Advent 2006, is what, my friends, shall we choose to emphasize? What in our lives, what in our common life, as a people of faith, shall we choose to emphasize? So often, when speaking of end times, what is chosen to emphasize is destruction, is annihilation, is deciding who is on the “in” and who is on the “out,” and you better make sure you’re on the right side, because you better look out. It all comes down to this. Sometimes that is the emphasis, and it rarely sounds like good news.

Consider these words from the writer Madeline L’Engle She writes, “In the Christian church, these weeks leading up to Christmas, this dark beginning of our new year, is also traditionally the time of thinking of the last things, of the eschaton, the end. That day when all night will be spent, when time will end. We all know it’s coming. It has to happen sometime. It was a long time,” she continues, “before I could begin to think of this ending of all known things, all matter, the stars and their courses, music, laughter, sunrise, daisies and dynasties, starfish and suns, suns and chrysanthemums, as being in any way something to look forward to with joy and hope. But annihilation is the opposite of what the eschaton is about. It is not nearly so much a going as a coming, an ending as a beginning. It is the redemption, not the destruction, of creation. The redemption, not the destruction of creation. Jesus says, ‘Stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.’” Do you hear what she emphasizes?

And what has Adrian Rich emphasized? “In the face of that which makes her, and all of us, faint. That which is far out of our control, out of our influence, that which is so devastating, that which if we had the wand, we would wave it and make it completely otherwise. It slips out of our hands and careens out of control. My heart is moved by all I cannot save,” she writes. “So much has been destroyed – war, broken relationships, an unequal society, prejudice, and oppression.” But she writes, “I have to cast my lot with those who age after age perversely, with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world.” With no extraordinary power. I love her choice of the word “perversely,” and because she is a poet, we know that she chose that specifically.

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I don't know about you, but when I hear the word perversely, I think of something off putting [?]. Something that is meant to offend. And I think she means to provoke us, because this notion that we shall place our hope, not in the grand structures of society or even the church, but in those who, with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world is perhaps a perverse notion. It's an incredible notion. And yet, I believe her when she says that. That it is not so much our politicians or our religious leaders or our social, our cultural icons in whom we put our trust, but in those with whom we come into contact every day, and who show us acts of kindness and compassion. And sometimes its just folks doing what they do, doing their job, interacting with us as we go throughout our days. This, Rich suggests, is where we might place our trust, not in extraordinary power, but with no extraordinary power.

Consider these words from James Looney. He is a member of the Christian Peacemaker teams, and he and three others were taken hostage in Iraq in the past year. They were held captive for 118 days. Consider that. Not knowing if each day would be your last or if you would see another. Reflecting on his experience, he wrote this: "This, I think, is what I've learned, though I make no claims about successfully living it. We are born to be born again, and again, everyday, in every moment, in every decision, big or small, regardless of where we are or what is happening to us. We were given birth to give birth. And every body is holy. The hardest birth of all is dieing. The labor pains will seize us. We have no control over the time or place. Our job is to allow God to breathe through us, together, into the mystery of incarnation."

No extraordinary power. [Inaudible] the choice of the day and of the decisions of the moment. How we shall act now? What we shall choose to emphasize in our lives? When I read Jesus' apocalyptic veil opening words, what I choose to notice and emphasize, I hope you heard it too, is encouragement. There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, he says, "and distress among the nations. By the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory." And here's the encouragement. "Now when these things begin to take place, stand up, raise your heads, because your redemption, the redemption of the world, is drawing near."

Finally, these words from Joanna Adams' writing in a recent issue of the *Christian Century*. There's a wonderful tie to our own Congregational tradition. "During the colonial period in American history, an eclipse of the sun caught members of a New England state legislature off guard. In the midst of general panic, a motion was made to adjourn. But one of the legislatures stood up and said, 'Mr. Speaker, if it is not the end of the world, and we adjourn, we shall appear to be fools. If it is the end of the world, I choose to be found doing my

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duty. I move you, sir, let candles be brought.” Bring on the Advent candles, and let’s live in love and in hope, until our Lord comes again.

Amen.