

# FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

by Rev. Emily Chapman

November 29, 2009

8:30 and 11:05 a.m. plus 9:45 a.m. Service of Word and Table



## ST. PAUL'S

### UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

5501 Main Street

Houston, Texas 77004-6917

713-528-0527

[www.stpaulshouston.org](http://www.stpaulshouston.org)

## Lectionary Texts:

Jeremiah 33:14-16; Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; and Luke 21:25-36

### Jeremiah 33:14-16

<sup>14</sup>The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. <sup>15</sup>In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. <sup>16</sup>In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness."

### Luke 21:25-36

<sup>25</sup>There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. <sup>26</sup>People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. <sup>27</sup>Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. <sup>28</sup>Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

<sup>29</sup>Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; <sup>30</sup>as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. <sup>31</sup>So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. <sup>32</sup>Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. <sup>33</sup>Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

<sup>34</sup>Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, <sup>35</sup>like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. <sup>36</sup>Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

The days are surely coming says the Lord. Be alert. Be on your guard, so that the day does not catch you unexpectedly, like trap.

These are our warnings from scripture on this first Sunday of Advent. Elsewhere in scripture we are admonished to keep alert, for we do not know the day or the hour when the Son of Man will come again.

These days, one thing we do not lack is information. We are bombarded with information from every direction through every imaginable media. In the age of 24-hour news networks and internet sites where anyone with a keyboard can spread whatever information they want, in the absence of real information, something will be made up to fill the time. Which is why we shouldn't be surprised that even though we are clearly told that no one knows when Jesus is coming back, people have not stopped guessing. What's more, people have not stopped trying to cash in on their guesses. We have some deep desire to know about what is to come and think that, surely, somewhere in our Bibles the information is there – if we could only crack the code.

That's why so many people have gotten rich by putting out claims that they have unlocked the Biblical prophecy and can now tell us anxious people just what will happen. I'm thinking of things like the wildly popular *Left Behind* book series that sold millions upon millions of copies. More recently, the movie *2012* has been released, the premise of which is that the world will end at the end of Mayan calendar, which happens to be December 21, 2012. You can find countdown clocks all over the internet to the end of the world. But every guess made along the way has been wrong, has been false.

Here this morning, I will tell you the truth about what the Bible says about when Jesus will come back and when the end of the world as we know it will be. And I won't even charge you for it (though you are always welcome to drop a little extra into the collection plate when it comes by). The truth is, no one knows. No one knows the day or the hour, and it could sneak up on us at any moment and in fact will likely be when we least expect it. So let's not devote much more energy to the pointless effort of predicting or fearing when the world will end, which Jesus has told us we'll never know, and focus on what Jesus tells us we can do in the meantime, which Luke says is to "keep alert."

This is the part where I am supposed to launch into some good examples of ways to be alert, of things and people to attune ourselves to as we imaginatively prepare for the coming Christ this Advent season. I can think of an endless number of examples, and I am sure you can, too. I hope you'll think this week about ways you can be more alert to God's work around you. But this morning, I want us to focus on one very specific thing. In addition to being the beginning of Advent, we mark another important day this week.

December 1st is World AIDS Day. Around the globe, people will take time to remember and lament the tragic reality of the AIDS crisis. We don't talk much about HIV or AIDS in church here. For most of us, it's not something we are keenly aware of on a daily basis. Yet in many communities the world over, it is a daily reality...in a church I worshipped in two weeks ago while I was in South Africa, they had a moment of the service, which they have every week, devoted to HIV and AIDS. It is an ever-present reality that cannot be ignored. For some in our own community that is also the case. But many of us have gone a long time without ever thinking of those who are infected and affected by this disease. Why is it important that we talk about it this morning? What difference does it make for our discipleship, especially in this Advent Season?

Our impulse in the face of any immense pain and suffering is turn away. We may not be proud of this reaction, but the fact is we just have a strong urge to protect ourselves from becoming overwhelmed. Our instinct for self-preservation forces us to turn away simply to prevent ourselves from drowning the tidal wave of grief that would be brought about by facing the human reality of the disease. So we try to make it a scientific issue, or, more commonly, a moral one. No disease has been more subject to judgment and condemnation than HIV. All of these are ways of turning away, of choosing to act in self-protection rather than compassion.

Compassion means keeping alert, seeing the reality of the world around us. And the AIDS crisis reveals much about the world to us — issues that existed long before the Centers for Disease Control first said the name Auto-Immune Deficiency Syndrome. AIDS exposes the realities of poverty and gender disparity. The self-

protective part of us that believes that the disease is contracted as a result of irresponsible decisions about one's body are shattered in the face of statistics of the incidence of women and children especially contracting the disease at the hands of others who use their bodies as a means of domination or of escape from oppressive social condition.

I could prattle off any number of statistics, but that's not why we are here this morning. Though, in your bulletin you can find a website should you choose to educate yourself further, and I hope you will, even if you think you are already aware. If we choose to see, to keep alert, we'll see that AIDS exposes our world for what it is — a deeply wounded and and unjust place.

Yet this leads us right back here...to Advent, to waiting and longing for our Messiah to come. Facing the grim truth of this disease and the social ills it brings to light, we are lead straight to the heart of God, who loved us so much, who wanted so much to be with us, in spite of all the brokenness of the world, that God became one of us.

In Advent and Christmas we celebrate the Incarnation — God made one of us. We find Jesus...a refugee, the child of an unwed teenager, born in a stable, executed like a criminal. No one in this world can sink so low that they are out of reach of this Messiah<sup>1</sup>. This is the meaning of the Incarnation we long for this season — we are never alone in our grief. When Jesus was among us he gathered the poor of the earth, including those with socially isolating illnesses, those people were frightened to touch, and ate with them. And then in his death and resurrection shows us that none of this, no disease, no death has the final word.

This reality stands stronger than any reality of our world today.

This kind of alertness to the reality of the world and the reality of God calls us to respond faithfully, not casually sending money to research, or sentimentalizing the plight of those suffering at the hands of this cruel disease, but in real ways. Preferably, by befriending someone with HIV. Someone once said that the greatest thing Princess Diana ever did was touch someone with AIDS. Our response should be no less compassionate. Or we might put our energies to organizations that are really fighting poverty in the world, giving people something more to live for so that they are less inclined to put their lives and the lives of others at risk so easily.

And, of course, we pray, for those who suffer but also that we might keep alert and recognize Jesus in the face of this disease. We pray for God to be with us as we try to engage the world faithfully.

Along those lines, I suspect that our engagement with this disease has implications for how we face any of our global challenges as Christians. When we respond to anything we face in this world, we respond together so that we are not overwhelmed. During this special holy season, when we declare that God has become one of us in Christ and that Christ will come again, let us slow down enough to be alert and to see the world as it is, painful though it may be. Advent is a time of absence, where we acknowledge that we are still waiting for Jesus to come again. Until then, he has asked to keep alert, to come together and be the body of Christ in the world in the in between time – to live an incarnational life modeled on Jesus' own self-giving love.

When we try to predict the end of the world as we know it, in Christian circles that guess is often followed by the question of where will you end up? Christianity becomes about where you go when you leave this world – will you be in heaven or hell?

But Jesus seems to teach us that the bigger question isn't about what happens when you die...the bigger question is if tomorrow comes and we are all still here, how are you going to live?

In a world where poverty and disease threaten to overwhelm, how will we live together in the promise of Advent, that no matter how overwhelmed we may feel, the promise is – Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

Let us wait with ready hearts.

#### (Footnotes)

<sup>1</sup> Wells, Sam, "The Three Realities of AIDS" Preached in Duke University Chapel, December 2007