

First Sunday in Advent  
Jeremiah 33:14-16, Psalm 25, Luke 21:25-36  
November 29, 2015  
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For my birthday, son John gave me a book about a man who started surfing at a very young age in California and became a career surfer and excellent writer. I am thoroughly enjoying the book and still in the early chapters. The author is now in his late teens and living just off a beach in Hawaii so he can surf before sunrise and sometimes at night as well.

I'm sure this book was influencing me when I found myself daydreaming about purchasing a new surf board. Upon coming to full consciousness and wakefulness, reality came crashing in. It makes no sense to buy a new board when my surfing days are numbered due to increasing age and ability. At some point people like me have to conclude that no matter how hard we work and practice, we are not going to improve at athletic pursuits. Our age, fitness and reflexes are just going in the wrong direction.

One of life's present challenges, I am finding out, is accepting that while my mind thinks I'm still a relatively young man, my age and body don't concur. I am not depressed over this yet as long as I can still do the things I enjoy even on a limited basis. It's not the time in life to buy new sports equipment, however. I am much closer to the end of my life than I am to the beginning. Trust me, I don't want to go back and do it again, so it's full speed ahead, sore bones and all.

Advent I is the church's New Year, which begins with passages about another kind of end time. On this Sunday, we always read about the second coming of Christ descending on the clouds of heaven. The signs in the sun, moon and stars and among the nations distressed by raging seas, which Luke mentions, are all drawn from the Hebrew scriptures and mostly from the prophets and the psalmists. These images show up when Israel is being overpowered by an enemy, sometimes as a consequence of the people's sin.

The occasion here, during New Testament times, is undoubtedly that Rome is persecuting the young Christian movement. When times are very difficult and lives are in peril, the return of Christ is a hopeful and life-sustaining belief. Jesus will deliver believers from their misery soon, so don't lose faith is the ultimate message.

So many Negro spirituals composed and sung during the dark days of slavery are about the second coming of Christ. The most familiar to us perhaps is "Swing low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home." A little later in this service, the choir will sing another called, "My Lord, what a morning." The entire refrain is, "My Lord, what a morning, when the stars begin to fall." Christian slaves were bolstered during those trying times by singing, praying and hoping that

the cosmos would collapse in their lifetime, and Jesus would literally come down and carry them home to a better place.

I have been with a few older people who went to bed every night hoping and praying they would fall asleep for good and be with Jesus.

I have mixed feelings about the second coming of Christ, as it is described in the New Testament. It may not make much sense for me to buy a new surf board at this stage in my life, but I am not ready or eager for the second coming of Christ, personally. I suspect you aren't either.

On the other hand, as we look across the globe, much of humanity is suffering from excessive heat or cold, drought, flooding, disease, earthquakes, civil strife, extreme poverty or from just plain evil people who capture, enslave and inhumanely use innocent people for profit. For these victims everywhere, I do want Jesus to come again and set these wrongs right and relieve people's excessive pain and despair.

The latest incidents of terrorism in Paris have set the western world on edge once again as we were after 9-11. Some might say it is a sign of the end, but I think that's going too far.

What I find most interesting in today's gospel is the comparison between believers' and nonbelievers' responses to the signs in the heavens and the earth that Luke describes. On the one hand, certain people will "faint with fear and foreboding." At the first sign of difficulty, some will shrink and withdraw in fear, saying, "Woe is me." Remember Chicken Little? An acorn fell on his head, and he became hysterical and thought the entire sky was falling. He was an end-time doomsayer.

But Jesus says that, even if the sky is falling, we are to "stand up and raise our heads." That is a faith position and posture. That is an active, hopeful, forward-looking response to hardship and challenge rather than the opposite, which is to react with fear, pull back, shut down and shut out.

Some of you may not agree with me, but I think being suspicious of all Muslims and refusing to accept any Syrian refugees into this country after a rigorous and already lengthy vetting process is to "faint with fear and foreboding." Jesus never said that being his follower and loving our neighbors as ourselves would be the absolutely safest way to live. He did say in so many ways that love and inclusion are always a small risk worth taking. He certainly took a risk with us. Love, in the Biblical sense – "agape" in the Greek – always has an element of sacrificial giving just as we find in our marriages and with our families and exhibited by police, soldiers and firemen on our behalf every day. Loving others as God loves us and trying to be a Good

Samaritan is always the great challenge of our faith and one in which we fail frequently. But we must not stop trying, with the help of the Holy Spirit.

Fear, on the other hand, closes the heart. How many times do we hear angels or Jesus say, "Fear not!" in the gospels.

On a very practical level, the more we distrust Muslims in this country or treat them as anything less than full citizens just like us, the more likely some are to join the ranks of the terrorists and put us at greater risk of harm.

In addition, maybe we shouldn't forget that we have made regrettable mistakes in the past when we tried to protect ourselves by separating or shunning others, and that all our ancestors came from foreign countries. My great grandfather came here from East Berlin, Germany.

Whatever you believe about the second coming of Christ, one thing is for sure. We will all meet Jesus someday whether he comes to us first or we go to him at the time of our earthly deaths. The message today is that we can and should look forward to that day either way. Redemption, we're told, is the final act. God will make new what is old, imperfect, and broken.

In the meantime, Jesus says don't become weighed down with the worries of this present life. While we wait for the visible Christ, be alert to the invisible Christ we meet every day in the poor, the stranger, and people like you and me. Our task as Christians should be to help everyone have a good enough home while we all wait for Jesus to bring us to our permanent and eternal home. AMEN.