

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 29 November 2015
A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman
Advent 1C and People's Climate March
Jeremiah 33: 14-16, Luke 21:25-36, Contemporary Reading ⁱ

This morning our service will be followed by a prayer service at noon, in preparation for our participation, as people of faith, in the People's Climate March. Whether you are able to march or not, you are very welcome to stay on for the prayer service, when we will be joined by possibly hundreds of people of faith on their way to the march. And I mention this now, in part to explain, why this reflection will be brief. (Nobody seems to complain about a brief sermon!)

The timing of the People's Climate March was determined by the UN Climate talks that will take place next week in Paris. Advent played no part in choosing the date and yet it is a profoundly Advent activity that we are undertaking. We are announcing, by our voices, in our bodies, and through our prayers, that we and the world can be changed, for good.

Through the Sundays of Advent this year we will name the traditional themes of the Advent candles – hope, peace, joy and love.

Today we lit the candle for hope.

Hope like a seed buried in the earth; hidden, covered by layers, disappointment, struggle, pain;

buried yet stretching, growing and becoming.

Hope, like a seed becoming new life.

We need hope. We want hope. For ourselves and for our world, and especially on this day of the People's Climate March, for our planet home. It is part of the yearning, the longing, that is Advent.

Yet the reading from Luke's reminds us that hope is not easily come by. And it reminds us that Advent is not just about the coming of the Messiah in the baby of Bethlehem (or wherever he was actually born) but about what has been called the Second Coming.

You might ask what are we doing talking about the end times when everyone wants to focus on the baby in the manger...? It seems inappropriate!

But every year, on the first Sunday in Advent, we have one of the versions of what is known as the "little apocalypse".

The little apocalypse is not from the time of Jesus' birth. It pre-sages his death. It is the name given to the discourse when first Mark, and later Matthew and Luke, have Jesus describe what will happen after his death when he returns after his death.

Luke's picture of the end times is frightening and yet somehow beautiful and hopeful, as the leaves of the fig tree herald the coming of summer.

Like Jan Richardson's painting on the front cover of the liturgy sheet, *Ending and Beginning*. There is a sense of tumult and instability but within our sight is another world, another way of being.

As difficult as it is to hear, as troubled as the text may make us feel, in it are resources that can help focus us on the true meaning and purpose of Advent. In it, Jesus challenges us, as he did his original hearers, to look up, pay attention, to be ready.

The word Advent means coming or arrival. This jarring, discordant text reminds us not just to get ready for the birth of the Christ Child but also to get ready for a world that is reconciled to God in Christ, a world in which there is no more war, no victims of climate change, a world of peace, compassion and justice.

This changes everything!

Christians who think of themselves as progressive tend not to dwell on the idea of the Second Coming of Christ. This resistance comes because talk of the Second Coming has traditionally been associated with fear-mongering and fundamentalism. I've talked before about the best selling fiction series *Left Behind*. Those books tried to motivate people by fear (and by a lot of very bad biblical interpretation). Today the wars in Iraq and Syria, the terrorism in Paris and Beirut, the movement of a flood of refugees across the face of world, are being construed as signs of the end times – but by people who care very little about the wellbeing of earth and its creatures.

But like Jan Richardson's painting, Luke's description does not leave us in fear. Despite some frightening images, the text offers not damnation, but hope and expectation. God in Christ is coming because God loves us—because God wants to redeem us. God desires a world reconciled to Godself.

In the midst of the fearful descriptions, Jesus calls us to stand up and raise our heads, because our redemption is drawing near.

I very much value John Dominic Crossan's plain-speaking about the mythological, other-worldly understandings of the Second Coming and his reimagining of it in a way that is concordant with God's love for us and this one world we have.

Crossan wrote:

"The Second Coming of Christ is not an event that we should expect to happen soon.

The Second Coming of Christ is not an event that we should expect to happen violently.

The Second Coming of Christ is not an event that we should expect to happen literally.

The Second Coming of Christ is what will happen when we Christians finally accept that the First Coming was the Only Coming and start to cooperate with its divine presence." ⁱⁱ

Our context, and our way of thinking about the future, are very different from that of Luke. But many people today live in circumstances that are similarly marked by disease and despair. Famine, drought, war, and disease (remembering that Tuesday is World AIDS day), still plague our world, and closer to home people struggle with greed, addiction, mental illness, domestic violence, and misplaced priorities.

Whether we are privileged or marginalized, we live in a global context that moves us to hope for another way of being together as human community, another way of being earth creatures that is sustainable, another way of relating to those whom we love, and to those who we encounter in our everyday living. In Advent we name our yearning, our longing, our hope for another world that is still this world.

In the endings are beginnings. In the midst of loss, devastation, shattered worlds, personally and globally, may we name with courage, and with hope, our faith in the Christ, the Christa/Community, which gathers us up and offers us healing, restoration and reconciliation.

So let us celebrate this first Sunday in Advent.

This day, a glimpse of what God longs for,

as we join our longings to God's,

as we hear again

the promise of new life.

ⁱ "The Coming of God" By Ann Weems in *Kneeling In Bethlehem*

ⁱⁱ Crossan, *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now*, p. 231).