

## Showing Up—First Sunday of Advent

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[Jeremiah 33:14-16](#)

[Psalm 25:1-10 1](#)

[Thessalonians 3:9-13](#)

[Luke 21:25-36](#)

*Sermon delivered at Christ the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Hamden, CT*

Jeremiah says, “The days are surely coming.” The Psalmist sings, “for [God] I wait all day long.” The apostle Paul writes to the earliest of churches in Thessalonica about, the coming of our Lord Jesus.” And Jesus in the Gospel of Luke says, “Be alert at all times.” These are the themes of Advent, to wait for God, to look, to sharpen your senses; to look at endings with the lens of hope, and see them as beginnings.

But has not Jesus already come? Wasn't little baby Jesus already born, 2021 years ago? What then is there to wait for?

The only way I can answer this question—or *try* to answer this question—is to tell you a mystery. (Folks from our Cross-Generation Sunday morning learning might know what I'm talking about.) Scripture, the Bible, is full of stories, of course; stories of Abraham, the ancestor of all people of faith; stories about Egypt, and enslavement and liberation; stories about Kings and excesses and failure; stories about a man who was killed and then raised again; and stories about people of faith forming churches and learning to live together and honor God with their lives.

However, scripture is also full of images, of little pictures. The things I listed about Advent are not themes so much, as images. Look at our readings for today, the first Sunday of Advent. They are full of images:

“Trees”—a righteous branch from the stock of king David, and also, trees in the sense of changing seasons, new growth on the fig tree. “The coming of Jesus.” “Waiting.” And also images of “endings,” of heaven and earth passing away.

These images don't work like stories. Stories start, and have a middle and have an ending. Images, on the other hand, pass through time. A tree—the idea, the qualities of a tree—is outside of time. And Advent, I think, is a time to connect with Scripture on this level. When we connect with Scripture this way, suddenly we can relate better to the image of heaven and

earth passing away or the picture of waiting for God to show up, or of Jesus busting through the barrier of heaven and being here.

Think about a time in your life when something has come to an end, for example. A death. A failure. A time you moved to a new place. When you retired and put your work to rest. An end. Follow me now, if you can, what if that end, was the same end that Jesus is talking about. All ends, every time something has ceased to be, all losses and shifts. What if they were all related—all one, cosmic image?

I know this sounds a little “out there.” And it is. The world—and the culture—that we live in does not allow this to be true. Stories begin, lives begin, have middles and endings, it says. And that's it.

But we are people of God. And God chooses to come to us, also, in images. The image of a baby, helpless in a manger. The image of a body, who has surrendered to cruelty on a wooden cross. The image of that same body, raised, transformed into new life. As people of images—images we encounter in Scripture—our whole lives are blended with God.

Just as all the “endings” we have been through are blended with the cosmic “ending” Jesus is speaking about today in Luke, just so: linked with that ending, are also all our new beginnings. And between the time of end and beginning, we wait. Retirement is a new beginning, but those who are retired will know, it takes time to learn how to live without a career. Losing a loved one, a companion, is a bitter end and it takes time to see this as a beginning. Buying a house, having a child—all are beginnings that require waiting. The waiting we do, is the same waiting that the people of God did before Jesus was born, and it is the same that we do waiting for Christ to come again. It is all holy waiting. Holy waiting, as we wait for our lives to start again when they fall apart, as we wait for God to show up.

And this is another, powerful image we have today in Scripture. God's showing up. God showing up in Jeremiah and Psalm 25 looks like a leader executing justice and righteousness. God showing up in the letter to the Thessalonians, and Jesus' speech in Luke looks like Jesus, the Son of Man, coming in great glory.

And I think with images of endings and beginnings, as well as images of waiting—I think we can probably process these, even though it's a bit out there. But images of God's showing up are tough. I know our culture doesn't allow these to be true, or seem possible. Our tradition is not big on the “rapture,” on Jesus snatching up the elect at the end times. And I think for us as rational believers we don't really believe in God speaking to us, in showing up during prayer or dreams, or some other place.

But Jesus says something worth noting: "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, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth." In other words, "God will show up, and you might miss it," says Jesus.

But when we see Scripture as images, and when we see our lives, all the actions and events in our lives, as images too, that relate to Scripture, that relate to God we suddenly allow for the possibility that *God* shows up when *we* show up for each other. As Christians we do believe that the finite stuff of this world: water, bread & wine, or mangers filled with hay—can hold the infinite.

As you all know we celebrated the life of Len Lye on Monday of last week. And in the past months I visited him, of course, that's what pastors do. It literally is in my job description in your constitution that I will visit the sick. And I visited and prayed. And I will tell you, as we live our lives, I will tell you there are moments when this whole Scripture-as-image things, and life-as-image, really pops, it really clicks and it can be overwhelming. After the funeral I was visiting with Len's sons and they kept sort of thanking me. And I was deflecting and saying, "You're welcome, it was nothing."

But the more I tried to deflect, the more they emphasized how much I had done for them. And one of Len's sons said to me with tears in his eyes: "You just showed up. And that's what mattered." And the hair on my neck stood up. It wasn't me that showed up, I realized, for Len's sons. It was God. God had shown up. As I ministered to them, in quite an ordinary manner, God had actually shown up for them.

When we enter into all the images of Advent—waiting, endings, beginnings, God showing up—we too often think of God, actually showing up in our lives like a transcendent beam of light... But never forget that the way that you minister to others in your lives, as servants of God's church, as teachers, as parents and grandparents, as laborers and volunteers—in all that you do—your showing up is a reflection of God's showing up. It is certainly so.

Outside of time, outside of stories—we believe in the image of God showing up. We believe that God shows up. God has shown up in Christ. God has shown up in me. God has shown up in you. It is at times hidden. It is at times hard to figure it out. But, we do believe, the closer we get to God's images in Scripture, the closer God's images draw near to us in our own very lives.

*Amen.*