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## *Hopeful Anticipation*

**A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Bill Harkins**  
**Advent 1 – Year C**

*Jesus said, "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. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."*

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

*"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. 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."*  
Luke 21:25-36

In the name of the God of Creation who loves us all, Amen. Good morning, and welcome to the Cathedral on this first Sunday of Advent, as we begin a new year in our liturgical calendar. Advent is a time of expectant waiting and preparation for the coming of Christ from two different, but related perspectives. It offers those gathered as the Body of Christ an opportunity to share in the anticipation of the nativity of Jesus, and to be alert for his Second Coming, as we hear in the lovely and prophetic words of Jeremiah, "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. 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." And Luke, in today's Gospel, writes of "the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory." Today's readings seem to take on heightened meaning given the uncertainty of our times with terrorism, domestic violence, and political and economic polarities, just to name a few of the current events with which we are faced. These only add to our anxiety about the present, and our wish to know what the future will bring. How can we be prepared? What are the signs of today that carry the seeds of what will be tomorrow? And perhaps at the heart of this for many of us, what is, and is not, under our control? Businesses, governments, and educational institutions—including the institution where I teach—hire consultants to predict what is to come, and offer advice as to how best prepare for it. This desire to predict the future is what prompts horoscopes and palm readers, and I recently saw an ad for a brand of watch which read "connected to eternity." I am not a Greek scholar, but I do know that *chronos*—or sequential, chronological time—and *Kairos*—which is the appointed time in the purpose of God, or sacred time under the aspect of eternity—are not the same kind of time. It is the former with which we are often confronted in this busy, sometimes hectic season, and the latter with which our liturgical season of Advent is primarily concerned. Sometimes in our cultural, chronological anxiety we begin Christmas right after Halloween, and we confuse Advent with Christmas, which is, in a way, like skipping from Palm Sunday to Easter without observing Holy Week. We forget to wait, and pay attention, and we risk losing the only moment we have, which is this moment, here and now.

In the midst of our anxieties about the future, there's probably no Christian teaching that's caused more excitement and confusion than what is often called the "second coming of Christ." And sometimes I wonder if we confuse that Advent with the beginning of Advent we observe today. They are related, but not the same. In one of my favorite Peanuts comic strips, Linus and Lucy are standing at the window looking out at the rain falling. Lucy says to Linus, "Boy, look at it rain...What if it floods the whole earth?" Linus, the resident biblical scholar for the Peanuts gang, answers, "It will never do that...in the ninth chapter of Genesis, God promised Noah that would never happen again, and the sign of the promise is the rainbow." With a smile on her face, Lucy replies, "Linus, you've taken a great load off my mind." To which Linus responds, "Sound theology has a way of doing that." Yes, "sound theology," the teachings of scripture and the Church, rightly understood, can help ease our anxieties about this doctrine. And sound theology can also be the occasion for us to think about hope, and waiting, and especially about what we can and cannot control. We need not worry unnecessarily, but we do have some responsibility to watch, and wait, and hope, and pray; and, to work for justice and peace. That's the Advent we observe today.

Scholars call passages like this one from Luke 21 apocalyptic literature. It was a style of writing that used vivid, striking images to convey a message of hope and faith. It was used especially during times when God's people were being severely oppressed. The Book of Revelation, for example, was written at a time around the end of the first century after Christ, when Christians were being persecuted by Rome. John, who wrote it, was on the isle of Patmos, exiled there by the Romans because he refused to deny his faith. So he writes to his suffering churches, using words and images he understood and his readers would understand but that the enemy would not understand. It's a kind of code, really, and it can be confusing to us in our context. But when you put it all together, it's saying, "No matter how bad it looks, don't give up the faith. Hang in there, for God is in control. So watch and work and pray. God is with us now, is both here, now, and is coming again." That's Kairos time. That's Advent time. It's so human to get confused in our anxiety about what the future will bring. In fact, many claim to know too much about it. I believe this is one of the problems at the heart of some religious views that claim to know, and have more control over those events, than is possible. It's not a bit confusing or mysterious to some, when and how things will end, which impacts choices made here, and now. And yet of that day and hour, Jesus said in Mark 13, the angels do not know, nor the Son. And when he was asked in Acts 1 when the end times would take place, he tells them, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. Here's what you are to know. You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come." I don't know about you, but I am wary of religious claims in our context that promise more than Jesus himself said he knew. The other mistake the church makes is in treating this teaching too lightly or dismissing it altogether. Some see it as an outdated doctrine that causes more trouble and confusion than it's worth...suggesting that it's no longer relevant for us. Both of these extremes make for questionable theology. As is often the case, there is a wonderfully inclusive both/and at work here, and it can assist in our observance of Advent.

Well, when I was a little boy I would visit my grandfathers' hardware store and lumber yard in his small town in middle Georgia. I loved him and I so enjoyed being with him in his world. In his office he had a big roll-top desk; the old-fashioned kind with endless cubbyholes and secret compartments, and drawers full of mysteries the key to which only he held. The desk was up against a wall between his office in a kind of liminal, transitional space, perched in the threshold between the cotton gin, with its powerful, noisy, and scary machinery, and the lumber yard and beyond that, the whole wide magical, mysterious world. I would sit on top of that desk, and simply pay attention. From there I could watch the cotton being ginned and I was safe from the huge roving vacuum funnel and the dark foreboding tentacles of the machines that I was sure would like nothing better than to snatch a small boy and incorporate him into a bale of cotton. In the other direction, outside the office, I could see the trucks come and go, and watch my grandfather as he moved with gracious authority in his domain, helping customers, writing invoices, giving patient instructions to employees. Sparrows chirped high in the rafters, and even on the hottest of summer days a cool breeze seemed always to be blowing through this vestibule where I waited, and watched. On special days, a train would pull into the yard on a spur of the line running from Atlanta, to Macon, and then on to Savannah. The train would stay only long enough for its cars to be filled with lumber, building supplies, and in season, bales of cotton. One day, I watched the train being loaded as it prepared to leave the yard. I noticed, however, that the train did not simply leave moving forward straight away. Instead, the engine backed up until each car had re-engaged the one behind it in a raucous cacophony of screeching, banging, crashing metal joints. I asked my grandfather why the train backed up first, instead of simply leaving the station. "Son," he said, "That is a very good question. You sit here for a few minutes and think about it, and I suspect that when I get back, you will have figured it out." In Rabbinical fashion, he was always on the lookout for teachable moments and was not prone to miss it by too quickly answering my many questions; kind of like Jesus teaching us to watch, and wait, and pay attention, by using parables. So I

did as I was told. I watched, and waited as the train backed up, each car banging in succession into the one behind it, until finally the engine began to move ever so slowly forward, creeping, creeping, with each car, beginning with the first one behind the engine, one car at a time. Then I saw it all at once, and the present and the future merged in a synesthesia of already and not yet, in train time. The train backed up so that when time came to leave the station, the engine did not have to pull the entire train all at once, but rather, as it gathered speed pulled first one, then another car, and so on until finally the whole train was headed south, towards Macon, and Savannah, and points unknown and the whole wide, wonderful, mysterious world. When my grandfather returned he smiled, and gently asked me if I had answered my own question. “Yes sir,” I said. “The train backs up first because that way it doesn’t have to pull all the cars at once. It can just start with the first car first.” “Very good, son,” he said. “I think you’ll find that life can be like that sometimes too...we start with the first car, and we don’t need to worry about the rest. They will follow along. We don’t have to pull all the cars at once.” For those of us who are members of Christ’s body in this place, dear ones, the season of Advent affords the opportunity to begin again, with hope, the next leg of our journey as believers in faith. This is the first car in the train that is our liturgical year. It is a time to think about the future by paying attention to what is here, and now, in this moment. In his Gospel, Luke writes of a time when nations are perplexed at the signs in nature and its awe-inspiring power, when men “faint with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.” The reading ends with the sprouting of the fig leaf as a sign of an upcoming summer—the season of growth and life that springs forth and is in stark contrast to the dead of winter. These days as I run in the woods, now almost winter-like in appearance, I am reminded that the tender green buds of the leaves that will adorn these same trees in spring are already there, just visible to the eye upon closer inspection. Indeed, it is the gentle push of these new leaves to come that causes the autumn leaves to let go. The prevailing cultural narrative in this season makes it so hard for us to wait, and we are so often in a hurry. I am among those who struggle with this. In Spanish, the verb *esperar* means both “to hope” and “to wait.” A gardener friend tells me that the *Esperanza* plant flourishes in harsh conditions, and blooms in gold and orange—hopeful waiting indeed. Waiting in silence and creating sacred space for hope to grow, and compassion to blossom, is a practice we can cultivate. As the old song goes, building upon a passage we heard in Luke’s Gospel just a few weeks ago, “Got my hand on the Gospel plow, won’t take nothing for my journey now. Keep your eyes on the prize...hold on, hold on.” Already and not yet, present moment, and the prize to come, Advent now, and Advent not yet arrived. Find a vantage point, somewhere in the midst of things, from which you might watch, and wait, and prepare. Advent, like its cousin Lent, is a time for reflection, preparation, and waiting—in anticipation of Emmanuel, God with us, here, now, already, always, Alleluia. Amen.