

Not the End Times

November 29, 2020 – 1st Sunday in Advent, Year B

1 Corinthians 1:3-9 | Mark 13:24-37 | St. Columba's, Zoom | The Rev. Ari Wolfe

“...in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light... the powers in the heavens will be shaken...” angels will be sent out, and God “will gather (God’s) elect from the four winds...”

In those days, after that suffering.

A lot has been written about the *End Times* and the return of Christ, and some say we’re getting pretty close; that between a global pandemic,

political unrest,

the damage we’ve done to the planet,
record numbers of people unhoused, jobless or hungry,

things are looking not only bleak, but these may be indicators, *signs*, of the “end of life as we know it.”

I’m going to disagree: these are not the End Times.

Jesus' followers prayed then as we do now to be spared from the time of temptation or trial, and to have the "kingdom of heaven" - the world of the Divine realm - enacted here on earth; "as above, so below." "Truly I tell you," the rabbi taught, "this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place."

People in these communities during the first 200 years after Jesus' death, when our four gospels were written, expected to see him return in flesh and blood ***during their lifetime***. It must have come as a surprise when that didn't happen.

So that's how it was *in those days. After that suffering.*

The time we are living in now is certainly a "time of Trial;" but each generation has its trials, even on a global scale. The world has seen pandemic before... and hunger and poverty, oppression and war, fear and suffering... it has before and it will again. So I'm not going to spend our time today looking for signs of an impending apocalypse, or the return of God-among-us in human form...

Rather than expending energy worrying over how-it-all-ends and the return of the singular divine incarnation - with the hope of an after life that will be better than the one we now have - I invite you to look for the Divine that is incarnate all around us.

If we are to maintain a state of *readiness*, let us live in the here-and-now and address the trials and the ills of our time. Let us stay awake, keep alert & always be ready and on the lookout for other human beings who need our help. Because ***they are*** God-among-us.

- Right here, in the form of our Black and Brown siblings needing to be heard;
- right now, as our neighbors are experiencing homelessness, hunger and cold;
- right here, in children who are still being kept separate from their parents in detention facilities at the border;
- right now, as half of the country yells, “no fair!” at the other half and fears that it will not be heeded.

But this is NOT the end time; our challenges are not insurmountable, our time of trial is not unique, and perhaps most importantly, we are not powerless in the face of it.

There is a saying that the Episcopal Church is fond of: “lex orandi, lex credendi” - *as we pray, so we believe* (or “The law of prayer is the law of belief”). Applying this to the Lord’s Prayer, praying “thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” is stating a belief that this can come to pass, and making a commitment to bringing it about; to make life better here and now. This is how it is in *these* days; we work to alleviate *this suffering*.

What looks like an end is often a new beginning; and today, in the midst of all of this, we get to begin a new year in the life of the church - Advent is the “beginning time.”

The more time I spent with our readings this past week, the more I kept coming back to one phrase, from the opening address of Paul’s first letter to the fledgling church in Corinth:

“Grace to you and peace from God...”

We usually focus on the *meat* of an epistle, the chunks of wisdom or assistance that Paul wanted to impart to the churches he founded to help guide them on the straight-and-narrow; but the way these

teachings were *framed* is as important as the lessons they contained.

“Grace to you...” The Greek word used here, **χάρις** (charis/ “KAH-ris”), appears 62 times in the New Testament. While translated as “grace” when coming from God to human beings, it seems to shift in the other direction when describing an interaction *from people to the Divine*; what is grace if coming *from* God to us becomes **thankfulness** when we return it.

But grace is not only a state between the Divine and Creation; we can be bearers of grace as well, for each other.

To further explore ideas of grace, I asked our Tuesday night meditation group what they thought about it, or how they defined or encountered it.

“A loving force,” a “fullness,” “a nudging or a tugging when we need it. Unmerited favor.” That last one especially drew me in, and we discussed it a bit; because I feel it’s an important quality of

grace, even if we can't quite define or pin down what it is, that it is not something we need to **earn**. It isn't anything we **can** earn.

And here is where I tend to go a bit off the path from some religious philosophies I've studied: I think we all have access to it.

I **believe** that we ALL have access to it. Grace is not just a thing for the *special* ones, for the "good people," for those who "live right," make all the "right" decisions, or do all the things expected of them.

Don't get me wrong - it is always good to strive to be our best selves; but I believe in my core that **grace** is there for us ALL. A Hindu saint, Sri Ramakrishna, said "The winds of God's grace are **always** blowing; it is for us to raise our sails." The corollary to it, from the same tradition, is that "if a person takes one step towards God, God takes ten steps towards that person."¹

Divine Grace is all around us and continuously being offered - it's ours for the taking (if "taking" can be said to be the correct word - I might actually go with "accepting") ...but we don't always know it, do we?

¹ Swami Vivekenanda quoting a Hindu proverb.
<https://www.facebook.com/knowswamiji/photos/a.351920988226526/1081423531942931/?type=3>

We have set up so many rules and qualifications for who we believe *does* or *doesn't* **get to be** loved by God, about who is worthy or deserving, UNworthy or UNdeserving, that we miss the point of grace: like *Love*, it is UNCONDITIONAL. We can each be a conduit of Divine grace for others, and can also strive for moments and expressions and actions of grace that are our own.

As we enter into the season of Advent, a symbolic time of waiting and anticipating, of looking forward to new birth, let's help one another to be present to the possibilities; to **await** but not wait **for**, not hold off on seeing that the spark of the Eternal **is** here among us now, wanting, needing, asking to be seen. Hold it in your heart. Hold sacred space. We *wait* and we *don't* wait. From where I sit, this is Grace.

These are not the End Times.