



Advent "When The World Is Ending"
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Welcome to Advent, the season of hope and anticipation, yes?

When I was a child one of the signs I always looked forward to was my Advent calendar. Any of you have an Advent calendar? Every year about this time my brothers and sister and I were given a new Advent calendar. It was usually a beautiful picture that had a bunch of little numbered doors, one for each day of Advent. Each day we would open a little door on the calendar. Behind the door was a bible verse, part of the Christmas story, and maybe a small piece of chocolate! Each door we opened was a sign Christmas was getting closer. We were counting the days. That was what Advent was about.

As a young person I liked Advent! I liked the way the house looked and smelled. I liked the music my parents played on the record player. The fondue pot and bowls of snacks my parents would set out for our guests. Advent was a time of expectation, anticipation, and excitement.

Yes, it meant Jesus would be born in Bethlehem, but it also meant family and presents! I looked forward to the future one day at a time.

Maybe some of you have had similar experiences. But then something happened. Somewhere along the way life got hard and Advent changed. Advent was no longer just the season before Christmas, a countdown. Instead, it began to describe the reality of my life and the world. This gospel text about the destruction of the temple, war, natural disasters, and betrayals took on new and often very personal meanings.

Advent became a season of change, letting go, and looking to a future that was not yet clear or known. I'm not exactly sure when it began or how it happened, but I know it did. All the signs were there.

It might have been reading the headlines and feeling like my prayers are unable to keep up with the pain and the needs of the world. "There will be signs," Jesus said.

It might have been that day I sat alone in my CEO-suite office, looking out the window, wondering how my life got to that point.

I had everything I wanted and wanted nothing I had. I had done all the right things, 2 graduate degrees and yet it all felt wrong! "There will be signs," Jesus said.

It might have been that night I sat alone on the eve of my mother's passing, with the lights off, looking around her bedroom, sensing and smelling her lingering presence in that space – a life ended, a future lost. "There will be signs," Jesus said.

It might have been any one of these, all of them, or a thousand other things just like them. These are just a few of my Advent stories, stories about how my life has been changed and the world as I had known it ended. What are your Advent stories? I'll bet you have them. I'll bet you could tell stories about the day your life changed, and your world ended. I'll bet you have lived through the seasons of change, letting go, and stepping into an uncertain future, maybe even a future you did not want.

Sometimes we wish Advent was as simple and easy as opening a little door on the calendar, eating a piece of chocolate, and knowing that Christmas is one day closer.

But it's not. You and I both know that world is not that simple, and life is not that easy. Maybe that's why every year on this day, the First Sunday of Advent, we always hear a gospel text that seems to describe the end of the world and the signs that will accompany that ending. This is not just a story about Jesus and his disciples. This is your story and my story. We experience it in our lives. We see it in our world. And today the church declares it to be the good news of Jesus Christ!

"There will be signs," Jesus says. More than ever our world needs to see the signs. The longer I live, the more I see and experience, the more I realize how necessary those signs are. I want to be reminded that the signs are there.

Every Advent story is accompanied by signs. Jesus says if we look, we will see the signs everywhere; in the sun, in the moon, the stars; in the distress among earth's nations, and in the roaring of the sea and its waves. I certainly saw the signs that night in my Mother's bedroom, and that day sitting in my office – probably a bit more clearly now than then.

I can see them today in the pictures of refugees and in the world's ongoing violence. I've no doubt you have seen the signs too. They are everywhere and they are not hard to spot. They are however, too easily and quickly misunderstood and misused.

"There will be signs" are really words of hope and reassurance, but far too often they have become misconstrued indicators that we better shape up or God is going to get us. Our misunderstanding of the signs pushes us further away from

God and deeper into our fear. Our misuse of the signs keeps us from seeing the coming of the Son of Man with power and great glory!

The signs are not a reason to hang our head in despair or shrink from life. That we can see the signs in our lives and in the world means that the circumstances we face and the events that happen contain and reveal the promise of Christ's coming. The signs are our hope and reassurance that God has not abandoned us, that God notices us, that God cares, and God never will leave us –even though we may feel like God has at times!

'There will be signs" are not Jesus' words of warning and threat. Jesus does not ask us to predict the future. Jesus never says these are the signs that the end of the world is right around the corner. Instead, Jesus says that when we see the signs we are to stand up, raise our heads, and know that help is on the way; our redemption, our healing, our Savior is near.

Jesus' parable of the fig tree teaches us how to read the signs. The Advent signs are as ordinary and common as a fig tree sprouting leaves. We see the leaves and we know something is happening. Summer is always near. It's a new season, with new life, new growth, new fruit.

That is the promise and good news of the Advent signs. And yet that promise, that good news, is fulfilled not apart from, but in, and through, the reality of our life's circumstances and our world's events, no matter how difficult or horrid may seem to be.

In nearly every aspect of our lives - home, work, school, and social settings - we find ourselves at times in profound discomfort, called on to construct new worlds - new ways of being together - that leave us feeling at least a little bit disoriented, frustrated, and longing for a world which, while not perfect, was a

world in which we knew the patterns, knew for the most part how we fit in, and in which *we believed* we knew at least the general shape of the future.

So, dear siblings in Christ, what if we looked on our lives and our world and we began to read and understand the signs in our Advent stories as sprouting leaves? What would we see? What would it mean?

It would mean we are entering a new season. It would mean we see new life and new growth—and that indeed the Spirit is alive and well and doing her thing as we produce new fruit. It means the Kingdom of God is as near as our own breath!

In Barbara Kingsolver's book of essays called "Small Wonders," she writes a poetic proclamation of the power of hope. The book is also a stinging diatribe against the hubris of self-centered America. Taking a sharp look at wars, natural disasters, the violence of the 21st century, she writes a modern translation of this passage from Luke we heard today.

But she ends her book with soaring words of hope--a call to a spiritual self-discipline, compassion, grace, and tolerance--a vision that matches the energy of Jesus' words to us today.

Rather than feeling hopeless, like a screen door banging in a hurricane, Kingsolver suggests that we should be the ones to bang and bang on the door of hope and refuse to let anyone suggest that no one is home.

She writes, "What I can find is this and so it has to be: conquering my own despair by doing what little I can. Stealing thunder, tucking it in my pocket to save for the long drought. Dreaming in the color green, tasting the end of anger." She

concludes: "Small changes, small wonders. These are the currency of my endurance and my life. It is a workable economy."

Today we Christians around the world light the first candle in a four-week journey through Advent. Let's open the doors of our life with new courage and confidence. Let's look on the world with a new sense of compassion and hope. Let's be strengthened to do the work God has given us to do.

And then with eyes looking up, and our heads held high, we are called to wait for God's promise to be fulfilled, rejoicing in the small wonders and the simple graces of these days.

"There will be signs," Jesus says.

May it be so--for you and for me.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.