

Jeremiah 33:14-16  
I Thessalonians 3:9-13  
Luke 21:25-36

Halloween is little more than one month past. It's at the end of October and now we're at the end of November and already two days into December. Today is the first Sunday of Advent and it really has nothing to do with Halloween except for a curious set of reverse images the two holy times conjure up.

This has to do with the two kingdoms we talked about last week on Christ the King Sunday: the worldly kingdom and the spiritual one. The worldly kingdom is populated by those who don't really place any value on the inner life of spirit and soul. They have nothing in their lives bigger than themselves. Their values are worldly values. The spiritual kingdom is populated by seekers – those who want to know God; want to love God and who train themselves to become ever more receptive to God. Their values are radically different from their worldly brothers and sisters.

So for Halloween, worldly citizens are afraid. Granted some of it is mock fear; perhaps even tongue-in-cheek. But the emphasis is on death as something scary and fearful. Halloween images include human skulls, blood, corpses and demonic characters.

For us in the spiritual camp, Halloween is the exact opposite! It is about life! It precedes All Saints Day – the day we celebrate the ongoing life and memory of those who have gone before us in death. We rejoice at their happiness in being one with the Divine Life.

For Advent, we a reversal thing going on yet again, little more than one month later. Worldly citizens are enjoying a heightened time of merry-making leading up to Christmas. While we in the spiritual camp are quaking in our boots!

At least, we have *cause* to quake as we hear from our readings – always at this time of year – a doomsday message. Jesus says, “There will be signs in the sun and moon and stars. There will be roaring of the seas.” He even says people will faint from fear!

We hear this doomsday message every year at Advent because believe Advent to be a time of coming. Certainly we wait by our manger scenes for a baby to appear but we also speak of an additional coming; the second coming. The second coming of Christ is commonly associated with the end of the world, hence: the gloom and doom; the quaking in our boots.

I'd like to offer an alternative understanding to the second coming of Christ by way of the late scholar Marcus Borg. There are *three* hopeful themes I've found from his analysis. He says the second coming “...affirms what is already affirmed by Easter: Christ is Lord.”<sup>1</sup> But the second coming allows us to say: “Not yet fully.” Christ is Lord but not yet fully.

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus Borg and N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1989, p.195.

The lordship of Christ in God's Peaceable Kingdom where the lion will lie down with the lamb just hasn't fully arrived. Not yet. We have a ways to go. And we have a part to play in bringing about that Peaceable Kingdom. It isn't going to just float down – ready-made – from heaven the way some Christians depict it.

And while Professor Borg is quick to affirm the second coming as important to our faith, he is candid enough to say that early Christians just got the timing wrong. The end is near, they believed. Even Jesus said in today's reading from Luke: "This generation will not pass away until all [these] things have taken place." It's gonna happen soon, he said. But doesn't that contradict what he said in a different gospel, the one by Matthew? He said: "About that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." [Matthew 24:36]

Safe to say there's some confusion about just when the lights will go out. And that's probably a good thing. If we were to know exactly when the end is coming, we might not be as attentive to God and to learning God's ways as we are now. You know the saying? "Those who plan to repent at the eleventh hour often die at 10:30."

So the first hopeful theme to the "second-coming-end-times" drama is *Christ is Lord but not yet fully*. There is a power undergirding all of Creation that we call Christ and it is the power of love. And in our faith we believe Love Wins. Maybe not today; probably not tomorrow; but eventually. There will be a time when perfect Love becomes a palpable, tangible Reality in this world and all Creation will live within it.

Another hopeful theme associated with the end times is judgment – believe it or not! The end times are always associated with judgment in scripture. In Matthew's gospel we are divided up between the sheep and the goats and the criteria for judgment become clear: have you fed the hungry; welcomed the stranger; clothed the naked; cared for the sick; visited the prisoners?

In other words, "Have you lived compassionately?"<sup>2</sup> That's hopeful because it means how we act in history matters. It means that we matter. What a powerful new narrative this would be to countless people mired in despair and depression. I read in the paper this week that the suicide rate in the US is at an all-time high, so much so that statistically it is reducing the life expectancy rates for Americans. Today's excess of leisure and luxury mean that we just don't need other people. Self-preoccupation and independence are acceptable ways to live in the kingdom of the world. But we're just not designed to be exclusively me-centered.

Have we lived compassionately? I had an interesting experience with compassion yesterday. I was walking into the grocery store when I passed a woman in a wheelchair sitting just outside the store's entryway. She was hunched over; possibly because of a physical defect. I initially thought she was a bell-ringer for the Salvation Army. But there was no bell; no red kettle.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

I was already in the entryway when it dawned on me she could be sitting in there instead of outside. So I approached her and said, “Would you like to be inside where it’s warm.” “No, I’m waiting for someone.” “Oh, yes, but it is cold out here.” “No, I’m fine, I’m fine.” She might as well have said, “Buzz—off—you—are—bothering—me.” So I wished her well and went about my shopping.

Compassion isn’t about changing the world. It’s about changing us. It’s about us learning God’s ways and practicing God’s ways of kindness and forgiveness and loveliness until they are as much a part of us as our lungs. It’s OK the lady didn’t need help. It isn’t OK for me to ignore her. This is the second hopeful theme: Are we living compassionately?

Then there’s the “mathematical twist” theme to the second coming. The first coming has already taken place. It was the Incarnation of Spirit into flesh; of the Divine Life into all of Creation. “And the second coming occurs each year at Christmas with the birth of Christ within us; the coming of Christ into our lives any time of year. Because Christ comes into our lives again and again and again and in many ways.

Perhaps now we can more soberly receive the end times message we hear every Advent. Maybe a little less quaking in our boots. Christ is Lord but not yet fully. Are we living compassionately? Because how we act in history matters and because we matter. And the second coming of Christ is really about the coming of the Christ who is already here.<sup>3</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.196