

**First Sunday of Advent (a)**  
**Isaiah 2:1-5   Romans 13:11-14   Matthew 24:36-44**  
**St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH**  
**November 27, 2022 [Traditional]**

I remember this experience I had on a sailboat on Lake Michigan. My Clinical Pastoral Education supervisor took four of us students out on his boat, north of Chicago. The day started off really well. The wind was steady. It was a beautiful day, and I was close to heaven. Sailing is one of my favorite things to do in life. About noon, though (typical Lake Michigan), the wind started gusting and kicking up the waves on the lake; the boat started to roll and lurch a little bit. There was nothing dangerous about it, but if you've been on the Great Lakes a lot, you know that those freshwater waves are weird. They can be bad on the stomach if you're not used to them.

I was a little queasy, but Dave, one of my fellow students...was really bad off. His face started to look like an avocado. He was trying to hide his misery, which made it worse. My supervisor saw what was going on, and he told Dave, "relax every muscle in your body, breathe softly and deeply. Now, find a point on the shoreline and focus on it. Imagine yourself being completely there, at that place." So Dave scanned the horizon and found the tallest building in the distance, and fixed his eyes on that point. And after a while, his stomach calmed down, and that feeling of panic dissolved. He made it through the rest of the trip, and he actually enjoyed it. And that stuck with me as kind of a lesson in life—when the waves get rough, stay focused on that one beacon, that point, on the far shore.

In this first week of Advent we always hear these broad-view scripture lessons. Usually in the gospels, Jesus is totally wrapped up with the people and situations right in front of him. He's always completely there in the moment, fully present, responding to each situation as it happens. Today's gospel, though, is one of those times he stops and paints a picture of the future, in big strokes.

And I cannot say I like what Jesus says. He warns that sudden judgment is going to come upon the world; and there's no way to know when the final cutoff is coming. Until then, all sorts of bad things are going to happen—wars, natural disasters, false prophets and persecution. You read Matthew 24 and it kind of makes you seasick. It's a picture of everything coming apart, convulsing and writhing. Jesus tells us to be ready. But there's no timeline: he just sets us on edge and tells us it's going to be a lurching, unpredictable and sometimes painful ride until the end comes. He just says "be ready."

And you notice: everything he talks about is happening now. Those signs are all around us, aren't they? Not everyone believes in God, of course, but based on what we see with our eyes, most everyone will agree that the universe as we know it is passing away, or will pass away. It's hard to hear, but Jesus—God himself—wants us to see that reality. And like Paul says, "If for this life only we have hoped, we are to be pitied." It's coming to an end.

I know I'm not alone in this at all, but for the past few years, world and national events have given me a seasick feeling. For my own sanity, I've started following Paul's advice: just focus on whatever is good and excellent in this world. I don't need to get caught up in all that seasickness. We don't know when the end is coming—but absolutely what we're seeing right now out there in the world today points to the end. This is how it ends. Dissolution. Disconnection. Strife. Convulsions. Death. Where should I focus my vision? I lift my eyes to the hills. From where is my help to come?

Another example of seasickness. It would be easy to worry these days about God's Church (as in church with a capital "C"). You see parents giving their children over to unbelief without much reflection. You see a good portion of church leaders watering down Christianity to make it sugar and fluff. About 10 years ago, I think I was just trying to hide my seasickness about church from everyone. Except Karen who had to listen to my complaining. So where should I have focused my vision? From where was my help to come?

The point is, there are so many things working on us all the time to make us feel that seasickness and helplessness and anxiety about the future. Some of us here are dealing with illness. Some of us are worried sick about loved ones who are struggling with ageing or hopelessness or addiction. Some of us are dealing with fractured marriages. We know how these things will push us into that little corner of the boat where we can't see much beyond the pain and the yuck that we're feeling.

Jesus doesn't give us a timeline, but all of the signs are there, the convulsions are happening, the false prophets are active. We don't know when, but all these things are signs. Yes: the end is coming. I think of how my supervisor told Dave to breathe deeply and find a point on the shoreline and focus on it. When we're in the middle of all this turbulence and seasickness, what can we focus on? From where is our help to come?

The prophet Isaiah in that first lesson lifts up a beautiful vision of the future, where in days to come "the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and all the nations shall stream to it," and the weapons of war will be beaten into plowshares and pruning hooks. He wrote those words at a time when by all indications, Israel was about to be annihilated. But Isaiah knew who God was, so he told people that victory was coming. God's victory. Isaiah knew that God would bring victory to Israel even through the destruction of Israel. That same vision of victory is there for you and me to take hold of every day—we can steer by it. We can look up from our troubles and focus on it, and know that through Jesus, we will be there on that far shore. He has brought that final victory to us here. It's already ours.

God is in control of how the story ends. And it's a shocking ending that he's given us in Christ. A resurrection from death. I know that I can stop wringing my hands. I can leave the ending to him, and concentrate on doing the works of God right now. Proclaim Jesus boldly. Love your neighbors boldly with God's love. Let's give ourselves generously right now. Let's shock people with our love, our confidence, our joy in Christ. Like Jesus himself in the gospels, we can make ourselves completely present and available to

the people around us, in every situation. Because we can trust our future to God. That's when the peace which passes all understanding becomes a reality in our lives. The future belongs to God; thank God! I can exhale my anxious need to control, and breathe in the power of the invincible Holy Spirit.

The victory we have in Jesus doesn't make the current storms go away. We're sailing on a turbulent lake. But never be discouraged. In another place, Isaiah gets really specific about what the future of Israel holds. He writes: "For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given; And the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." This Advent, as we sail across the waves towards Isaiah's vision of the peaceful mountain on the far shore, let's remember who's in the boat with us!