

“The Lamb is my Shepherd”

Happy New Year! Come on say it back to me. I love messing with people by reminding them that today is the first day of the Church Year with a little shout of Happy New Year. I think it is appropriate that the new year of the Church and the secular world are different. We do not let the celebrations of the secular New Year cloud the importance of the new year in the Church. The world outside these walls is in full swing with Christmas, mostly in order to sell more stuff. We are only two days from Black Friday, yesterday was small business Saturday, and tomorrow is Cyber Monday. There seems to be no end to how they can gin up the shopping frenzy. We know Christmas is four weeks away and gift giving may be nice, but the greatest gift is the one we are preparing our hearts for. Thus we have the season of Advent.

We mark this new season with the Advent wreath, changing the color of our hangings to a blueish purple, and readings that are preparing us for the second coming of Christ. As we await the birth of the Christ child we also await his coming in Glory.

Like the secular New Year approaching, we look back at the past to see how we got here and look forward in anticipation for what is to come. We look back at the good and the bad, the challenges and successes, the failures and the missed opportunities of the passing year. We look ahead to opportunities, new ventures, hopes and dreams for the year to come.

So today in the gospel lesson we look ahead with Jesus to a coming age. We look to a new era when Jesus' reign is over all the earth and not just localized in the hearts of some people. What Jesus was looking toward is what theologians call the eschaton—The End Times. The eschaton is not about a cataclysmic war that destroys the world. Rather it is about what the Old Testament prophets called The Day of the Lord. This is what Jeremiah refers to in the segment we heard today. The Day of the Lord is about righteousness. It is about the return to a state of grace when God's justice and righteousness will rule over all of the earth.

The eschaton in Christian theology is the end of the world as it is. That is a world that is run by super powers such as Rome. These are earthly kingdoms, principalities, and powers that rule over the earth, but do not rule as God would have them rule and certainly not as God would rule. The eschaton that Jesus speaks about in today's gospel is the coming of a new age of God. It is the day that God comes into the world and returns it to its proper order. That would be the order of the world in the Garden of Eden before sin and death entered the picture.

If that sounds scary don't let it. All we need to do is look to two books, the bookends, if you will, of the Bible—Genesis and Revelation—for help understanding what this new world will be. These two books show us what

God's rule looked like in the Garden and what God's rule will look like in what Revelation calls the "New Jerusalem."

In Genesis one of the key phrases that is often overlooked because of what happened subsequent to it, is the scene right before God discovers that Adam and Even have eaten from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. At that time Adam and Eve, "heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze."¹ We later hear God call out for the couple. What we learn from this little scene is that God spent time with the humans in the garden. We can even infer that God liked spending time with them. Indeed, God was accustomed to taking walks with the humans in the garden in the cool evening breezes.

When we look at the Book of Revelation we learn another aspect about God. Twice in Revelation we hear about the world restored after the eschaton. In Chapter 7 one of the elders describes those worshipping God. The elder says, "They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."² Later in chapter 21 as the New Jerusalem descends from heaven a loud voice says, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

What Jesus foretells in this portentous passage from Luke is not a doomsday scenario from Hollywood or a ridiculous novel. The end is the end of evil, darkness, sin, war, xenophobia, hatred, disease, and all of the "isms" that plague human beings. The end of this world is the dawn of a new world of justice, freedom, peace, and joy. It is a world where God will wipe away every tear. And like in the garden God will dwell in the midst of us.

On this first Sunday of Advent that is what we look for. It is why our first candle on the Advent wreath is the candle of Hope. It is hope for a new world where "all manner of thing shall be well."³

Let us look forward to the birth of the Christ child, but let us also look forward to the birth of the new world of God where all are at peace because the Lamb at the center of the throne is our shepherd. The Lamb rules not by force but with goodness and mercy. A lamb will be our shepherd, our souls will be restored and we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

¹ Genesis 3:8 NRSV

² Revelation 7:16-17 NRSV

³ Julian of Norwich, *Showings*.