

**Sermon preached at Grace Epiphany Church, Philadelphia
29 November 2009**

*I Advent: Ps 25:1–9; Jer 33:14–16;
1 Thess 3:9–13; Lk 21:25–36*

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Today's reading from Paul's first letter to the church in Thessalonica ends, "And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints."

When you read through the gospels and the letters that Paul actually wrote, it becomes quite clear that the members of those first church communities not only believed in the second coming of Jesus Christ to judge the world, but believed that it was going to happen soon, quite possibly in their own lifetimes. Some of them may even have been certain that they were seeing the actual signs of the end of the world that their early teaching texts told them they would see.

And so, from time to time in the twenty-one centuries since then, other Christians have thought they saw signs of the end of the world, and have preached and acted accordingly. We have been told to shape up, to straighten out our lives, to repent of our sins so that we would be ready for the final day, so that we would be blameless before God the Father when Jesus Christ came to judge us. Luke's gospel tells us, "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap."

We can understand, then, with so many prophecies about the end of the world that didn't pan out, that most of us have learned to relax a little bit, have learned that our normal ways might still be good for at least a little time longer. Many of us have lost that sense of urgency when you expect the world to end in a few weeks or a few months; we think that there will be plenty of time for amendment of life, for repentance, before the real end of the world actually happens—if it ever does. In what seems like a rational, stable world, we don't see that "People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken." One more day, one more week, one more year, even, of dissipation and drunkenness is not going to hurt anything; a little time longer being weighed down with the worries of this life will still leave me enough time to change; I'll have plenty of time next year to get my life in order so as to be ready for when Jesus comes again "in a cloud with power and great glory."

But is fear of judgment on the last day the only reason why it might be a good idea to shape up and straighten out our lives? Is that the only thing that can motivate us to repent of our wrongdoing and increase the amount of love and goodness we put into the world? Aren't there other very good reasons not to waste our lives in dissipation and drunkenness, not to tangle ourselves up completely in the worries of this life? Aren't there other very good reasons that have nothing to do with our appearance on the day of final judgment "to increase and abound in love for one another and for all," and to strengthen our hearts in holiness? Is the only reason we are church together because we live in collective fear of that judgment?

I once asked an atheist friend of mine if she didn't share my feeling of humiliation that, at the rate the human race was going, and in spite of the amazing ways in which we have transformed the appearance and functioning of this planet, despite all we've created in art and literature and music, in science and medicine and philosophy, the time of our dominance on the planet might not even equal that of the dinosaurs. She responded that she didn't care at all, just so long as she wasn't around to witness the end. I suppose that's one reasonable way of looking at it. I suppose it was a little silly of me to feel a sense of competition on behalf of the whole human race with another set of creatures that vanished 135 million years ago.

But, as far as I know, we are the first of God's creatures on this planet to be given the capacity to ask why we are here, to ask about the purpose of the time that we are given to be here. We are the first bunch of creatures that have been able to study history and paleontology—what came before us; to look out into the heavens and ask through astrophysics and cosmology what is out there with us. As far as I know we are the first bunch of creatures to whom it has occurred to wonder—philosophically, socially, politically, environmentally, cosmically—what may lie ahead of us. I think it is out of that wonder, and the anxiety that that wonder produces, that we construct scenarios of the end of the world and the end of time.

I think it is also out of that wonder that we look to God and ask the questions that encompass all the other questions: What does God want of us? What does God expect of us? What does God dream for us? And for me it out of that wonder that we look to Scripture and to other texts of human wisdom for ways to grapple with those questions. That is why when the poetry of Scripture speaks with an authoritative voice, we can gain some consolation and comfort. When Micah asks, "What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" we can only respond, Yes, what indeed?

It is just so that when Scripture challenges us to amend our lives, when it challenges us to "increase and abound in love for one another and for all" and to set aside the worries of this life and to focus our attention on bringing the reign of heaven into being, Scripture is simply giving us the powerful and poetic words we seek to express the desires of God, the expectations of God, the dreams of God. Increasing and abounding in love for one another and for all, doing justice and loving kindness, walking humbly with our God—these are things we do not because we are fearful about what will happen at the end of the world. These are things we do because they can bend the world towards God's desire, because they can take the world closer to the dream that a loving and merciful God has for us.

"And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you." For all the attention that today's Scripture readings want us to pay to the end times, to the time when Jesus Christ returns in victory and judgment, Paul's letter to the church in Thessalonica reminds us that the operative principle in church life is love. Regardless of what we think the end of the world will look like—or the end of the Christian church or the end of the Episcopal Church or the end of Grace Epiphany church—regardless of how and when those ends might approach, what we do in the present needs to be driven by love and needs to have as its most important product the increase of love. "All the paths of the Lord are love and faithfulness," says the Psalmist, "to those who keep his covenant and his testimonies."

God's covenant, kept by us, and God's testimony, witnessed in us, will take us safely to the end of time, whenever that may come. God's faithfulness and God's love, made flesh through God's Son and manifested now through us—however imperfectly and however sporadically—will change us and will change the world so that whatever comes we may look forward to it not in fear and foreboding, not with anxiety and despair, but with courage, with peace, and with hope.

As we approach the season that is both holiday and hectic burden, as we contemplate what our lives have been over the past year and what lies before us in the year to come, let faithfulness increase in us; let love increase in us. Let the incarnation of God among us be what it has always been: not the source of future fear, but the foundation of hope and peace in the present.