Jeremiah 33:14-16

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Luke 21:25-36

Psalm 25:1-9

“Pray constantly that you will have the strength and wits to make it through everything that’s coming and end up on your feet before the Son of Man.”1 That is a paraphrase of the final verse of today’s reading from Luke. And for me, it captures what this season of Advent is all about. Traditionally, Advent is a time of prayer, of waiting, of preparation. It can be a season of hope…or of fear, depending on how you hear the Advent message: fear, if you focus on those images of wars and turmoil; hope, if you focus on the image of God’s kingdom come. Advent is also a time for us to prepare for Christmas, that point in time when God became flesh, when the creator became the created, when love came down from heaven. And while Advent helps us prepare for the celebration of Christmas, it is much more than that. It is a time for us to prepare for the rest of our lives so that we may end up on our feet when Jesus comes again.

No one can deny the centrality of the Christmas celebration to our faith. But without Jesus’ death, resurrection, ascension and final return, Christmas makes little sense in and of itself. Therefore, this time of Advent points beyond the baby in the manger, beyond the shepherds on the hillside, beyond the choirs of angels singing “Glory to God in the highest.” Advent points us toward all that follows those momentous events. Advent points us toward Jesus’ second coming. Advent points us toward that time when God will be all in all. While Scripture tells us in many places that this final coming of our God will be full of confusing and terrifying signs, we are also commanded to awake from our sleep, to prepare the way of the Lord, to rejoice because Emmanuel is coming.

Advent is a time for taking stock, for revising plans, for seeking to understand more clearly the signs of the times – something like what we are doing here at St. John’s these days. “Our time can be filled with crises or opportunities, with routines or experiments, with dread or inspiration.”2 Advent is about experiencing how Jesus can come to us in every moment, for every moment can be a second coming, another revelation of God’s promise being fulfilled, a further chance to see more clearly that which once was hidden.

Advent asks us to ponder the question, “What time is it?” What time is it in my life, in the life of St. John’s, in the life of the world? We can experience time as moving slowly or swiftly, as being full or empty, as feeling graced or damned. Seeking to uncover what time it is – being in the Advent spirit, as it were – opens us up to noticing holy moments in the small and the large events of life. Holy moments can be like the sun breaking through the marine layer, or like the geysers at Yellowstone that astonish us by their force, or like the waters of baptism that renew our souls.

stranger, in those tender words spoken by our loved ones. Holy moments can envelop us in the fragrance of newly cut grass, in the pungent aromas of our favorite restaurant, even in the stench of a long-unemptied dumpster. Holy moments, God’s moments, are all around us and the season of Advent provides us another opportunity to notice that the kingdom of God has come near.

Luke tells us in today’s Good News that the future will be rough. To paraphrase again, “It will seem like all hell has broken loose – sun, moon, stars, earth, sea, all in an uproar and everyone all over the world in a panic.”3 But Jesus also provides us with this assurance: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.” (Luke 21:33) Jesus wants us to know that despite wars and earthquakes and civil unrest of all kinds, this world belongs to God. God is still the God of all creation. All is in God’s hands. And what's more, all appearances to the contrary, history is heading in God’s direction. Since the beginning of time the world has been groaning in birth pangs, laboring to complete God’s great mission, pushing hard to bring about heaven on earth. So when Jesus described terrifying events in the future, he also told the disciples that believers should hold their heads up high and rejoice. Nothing should shake our faith, our resolve, our affirmation that God is in charge and that Jesus is coming again.

During this Advent time, we are called to remember God’s promise spoken by the prophet Jeremiah, that justice and righteousness will spring up in the land. As we live in this season of preparation, we are encouraged to abound in love for one another and for all those we meet, as Paul wrote to the Thessalonians. When we hear the prophets of doom and gloom predict yet again the end of the world, we are reassured in remembering all that Jesus has taught us. So let us “cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light…” proclaiming to all we meet: “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.”

1. All paraphrases are from “The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language”
2. <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/livingaholyadventure/2012/11/the-adventurous-lectionary-the-first-> sunday-of-advent
3. All paraphrases are from “The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language”