

## “Peace My Soul”

Rev. David Gregory

November 29, 2020

Advent 1



### Readings

*Mark 13:28-29, New Revised Standard Version*

From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates.

An Excerpt from *Amazing Peace*, a poem by Maya Angelou

It is Christmas time, a halting of hate time.  
On this platform of peace, we can create a language  
to translate to ourselves and to each other.  
At this Holy Instant,  
we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ

Into the great religions of the world.  
We jubilate the precious advent of trust.  
We shout with glorious tongues the coming of hope.  
All the earth's tribes loosen their voices  
to celebrate the promise of  
Peace.

We, Angels and Mortals, Believers and Nonbelievers,  
Look heavenward and speak the word aloud.  
Peace.

We look at our world and speak the word aloud.  
Peace.

We look at each other, then into ourselves,  
And we say without shyness or apology or hesitation:  
Peace, My Brother.  
Peace, My Sister.  
Peace, My Soul.

Welcome to this first Sunday of Advent. Blessings to you as we once again embark on this familiar journey of peace, hope, joy, and love. Advent is the ultimate season of beginnings, one that brings the Jesus story forward in linear time to juxtapose with the calendar year that is winding its way toward its end in about a month. Just about everyone I know is looking forward to giving 2020 a rather unceremonious sendoff into the history books. In a very real way, Advent gives us a head start in that department, so whether you consider yourself a Christian or not, you might feel like hopping on board with us for the month of December, because a sigh of relief might be exactly what you need at the moment. Just consider this our gift to you, an early opportunity for a forward look. We could all use it.

Mark's gospel tells a story about a conversation between Jesus and one of his friends outside the temple. This disciple was rather awestruck with the size of the stones making up the temple wall and remarked about it. His remark created an opportunity for the teacher to put forth this metaphor, and speak of the true insignificance of something that seemed so substantial and seemingly immovable. "See those stones over there? There will come a time when not one stone will be left upon another."

It must have been a strange thing to hear Jesus say this. The temple, after all, was the center of Jewish religious life and culture. Inconceivable as it would be to lose it, it was something that had actually already happened. Solomon's glorious original structure was destroyed by the Babylonian invaders six centuries earlier. Later, when a Persian king allowed them to come back and rebuild, it had none of the earlier opulence, and those who remembered the first temple were disappointed. Then with the Roman occupation came Herod's renovation, which returned the temple to some of its former glory. In the times of Jesus, the people had their beautiful temple back, but it came with a huge cost in terms of justice, sovereignty, and peace.

What Jesus may have been saying in his conversation with his disciple is that this temple had lost its significance, and even in the presence of immovable stones, it would not stand. Once things began to change, nothing would stop the structures of corruption, patriarchy, and injustice from tumbling down. You could see it coming. You could smell it like an impending rainstorm. Like an avalanche, you could hear it before you saw it. The signals were in place. Massive systemic change was coming.

Learn the lesson of the fig tree, he said. You can take one look at its tender new growth and know exactly what season it is. It is as good as done. It's coming. Believe it. Don't give up. Don't lose heart. Life will go on in brand new ways; just wait and see. A bright green growing edge is there for anyone who has the eyes to see it.

These signals were rooted in centuries of communications through the prophets and the poets that a new reign of peace would come. Every valley would be exalted. Every mountain would be leveled. Justice would prevail. A child would be born, on whose shoulders would rest a righteous government. The widows and the orphans, or society's most vulnerable would be cared for. The sick would be healed. Swords would be beaten into plowshares. The lion would lie down with the lamb. This is the peaceable kingdom. We are primed and ready for it, and it's coming. Advent is the season that anticipates it. It's what Maya Angelou spoke of as the "halting of hate time," and there has never been a more opportune moment in human history for it to occur.

This Advent season, just like the year that has preceded it, is unprecedented. Very little of our annual observance resembles what we've experienced in our past at CCC. Each year at this time we gear up for the Christmas concert, the winter solstice gathering, and our Christmas Eve service, all involving crowd-filled rooms, lots of singing, hugging, and sharing of food. It does not matter to me that our nation's highest court has called these things the "free exercise of religion," because the pandemic rages on, and the numbers are staggering.

Hate speech and hate crimes, the incitement of racially inspired violence, the constant harangue of disinformation, a disdain for what is true, a distrust of science — all of these temples of falsehood, seemingly fashioned in immovable stones — they're coming down, we are told, with "the precious advent of trust," and the "loosening of our voices to celebrate the promise of peace." I don't know if you can allow yourself to feel it or not, but we're being invited into this huge collective exhale, and we're waiting for the moment when we can hear the words, "all together now." We've held our breath for a really long time, and it may seem like relief will never come, but it will.

After all is said and done, the promise of Advent is gestational. It does not happen all at once. It requires a time of progress and maturation, a place of warmth and growth not visible to the naked eye, but very much real, always evolving, always moving to the fruition of birth. As with any pregnancy, it's all about the waiting; sometimes uncomfortable, sometimes excruciating, sometimes worthy of screaming. Waiting. This process of Advent and Christmas has taught us the same lesson, perhaps with a lower level of pain. As children we were forced to endure the appearance of beautifully wrapped packages with colorful tantalizing bows tied in such a way as to make peeking impossible. "You have to wait for Christmas," we were told. These were the longest and slowest days of the year. There was the wondering, the measuring, the shaking and the rattling, all just to get some sense of what might be inside. But still there was the waiting, the interminable frustration with a clock and a calendar that refused to yield to the pressure. And finally Christmas morning came. And while other families tore into their gifts like a pack of wild coyotes, at our house we opened one gift at a time, taking turns around the room, savoring every ooh and ahh, waiting, waiting, waiting, like polite English Quakers, until every last present was revealed.

Advent feels hard this year. It's difficult to wait. We're pushing against all the restrictions that say over and over to us, "not yet." I truly want to believe that it will be worth the wait. The waiting isn't fun, but if we can learn the lesson of the fig tree, we'll have a sense that we're moving toward our goal. And once we have that sense, we can say, in the words of our great poet, "without shyness or apology or hesitation, 'Peace, my brother; Peace, my sister; Peace, my soul.'"

