

**First Sunday of Advent
November 28, 2021
Southampton, MA**

Scripture: Luke 21:25-36

While we celebrate Christmas as the birth of Jesus, it has profound theological implications. The UCC Statement of Faith states that God came into our world “and shared our common lot.” I remember one professor preached in a sermon, “God came to earth and squeezed himself into the body of tiny baby.” A baby, maybe the most vulnerable person we can imagine. That baby, whose survival relies completely upon other people, was God. That baby grew to be Jesus, who in this reading, promised to come again.

Luke filled this chapter with foreboding. Known as the mini-apocalypse, Jesus spoke of the Temple’s destruction, wars, earthquakes, betrayals, an apocalyptic future. Written decades after Jesus’ ascension and having not returned, many people wondered when. What would be the signs?

They were anxious. Overwhelmingly the people felt the weight of Roman rule. It was an oppressive regime which extracted tributes from the poor to make powerful elites wealthy. It forced Jews to face images of Caesar in violation of their law. The government used soldiers dressed as civilians to beat people with cudgels during protests and crucifixes, used to execute insurrectionists, stood prominently like public sentinels to induce fear, its tactic to maintain peace.

Jesus came to save the people. That salvation, though, was not for life after death, but a new life in this world. It would be a life where the common good prevailed, where love, not fear, kept the peace. It would be world where faith in God’s abundant creation would supplant the perception of scarcity. It would be a world defining wealth by how much we give away, not how

much we have. It would be a world in which leadership was servanthood not imposition of brute power. That salvation message resonated with the people.

Luke's vivid description kept the faithful waiting because by then they were losing hope. Not just that Jesus would not return, but that their liberation would not come.

We've read of or have been taught of seemingly apocalyptic events in our history, and Jesus has not come. Even today's anxious times may lead us to wonder if these are the signs telling us that Jesus' return is imminent.

Jesus knew his death was imminent, even though the disciples and those around him did not, except for Judas as he would betray Jesus the next day. This apocalypse, then, was what his death would bring, an end to Roman rule and, subsequently, the people's liberation. His death would be the end of an era, except the Roman Empire did not end with his execution or his resurrection. It continued for hundreds of years, eventually co-opting Jesus and making him its own.

Almost 2000 years after Jesus and after many "apocalyptic" times, Jesus has not returned. Do we continue to wait or is it a fiction? How do we understand Advent's traditional interpretation as a preparation for Christmas, God's in-breaking into our world? Or is our theological understanding of Christmas overblown and that maybe today's commercial interests more accurately portray the holiday's meaning, a consumerism orgy?

Though Luke's vivid description of the apocalypse was likely shaped by the tumult caused by the Jewish Revolt in 66 CE, which destroyed the Second Temple and led to the Jewish Diaspora, which ended with the founding of Israel in 1948, the basic theological theme remains.

Jesus' life and death and resurrection is our salvation, both personally and globally. Without question, Jesus changed the world beginning with his birth as a defenseless child utterly

depending upon people's love and compassion to survive, whose life and ministry without weapons of violence threatened the Roman Empire's existence, and whose resurrection proved that life always triumphs over death and man's inhumanity to one another, what we know as sin, never, ever is the final word.

Christmas celebrates the potential to achieve the impossible and to make real the inconceivable. Christmas reminds us that even in the darkest despair, light breaks through for us revealing the world anew. Christmas is not a date on the calendar. Rather, it is state of being and the world. Christmas comes at any time.

Consequently, Advent, this time of preparation, reminds us to be watchful. Be awake for those signs of Christmas promise. Be attentive to God's presence in this world. Be ready for unexpected and unfathomable moments that can change your world and maybe the world around us.

Advent also reminds us that we have an awesome responsibility to help God survive in this world. Though God is powerful, God utterly depends upon us to further the peace and justice rooted in radically, inclusive love that our world needs. That's our call. That's what makes Christmas real.