

Title: Preparing for the End  
Date: 11/27/2022 (Advent 1, Year A)  
Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church  
Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)  
Readings: [Isaiah 2:1-5](#); [Romans 13:11-14](#); [Matthew 24:36-44](#); [Psalm 122](#)  
Video Link: <https://youtu.be/hgjJS6fj4Is?t=1111>

Almighty God,  
we pray that you teach us your ways so that we may walk in your paths;  
and give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light.  
Amen.

Happy New Year!

The season of Advent is a great example of how the church is out of step with the rest of the world. Retailers are rushing us toward Christmas. Stores have been selling Christmas trees and decorations for a month, and some people already got a head start on their Christmas shopping between Black Friday and Small Business Saturday.

There are lights and wreaths and tinsel everywhere. Here, we steadily and resolutely light just ONE new candle, one week at a time.  
Everywhere else, Christmas music.  
Here? Advent hymns.  
Everywhere else, bright colors and loud sweaters.  
Here? Solemn purple.

At the same time, we get about a month's head start on everyone else when it comes to starting a new year. While other people rush to come up with their new year's resolution in the last seconds of Dec 31, we've already spent **four weeks** reflecting on matters of life and death, where we've been and where we want to go.

It's important to note that the church year doesn't start with the birth of Jesus. There is a four-week build up. Not only that, the readings for these four weeks aren't so much about preparing for the birth of a baby as they are about preparing for the eschaton, for the end of the world as we know it.

In a way, the two go hand in hand. When a baby arrives, it's the end of the world as their parents have known it. This is not a good or bad thing in and of itself, it just is. It's amazing how babies have a way of reconfiguring the world around them. There may be a room dedicated to them, and furniture and gadgets and gizmos aplenty. The people who care for them have to reorganize their priorities and redirect their time, attention and energy.

This is the case whether we're talking about giving birth to a new human or a new project, a new relationship, or a new career. Beginnings and endings may look like two distinct things, but they are one. As T.S. Eliot wrote, "What we call the beginning is often the end. And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from."<sup>1</sup>

The end is where we start from.

So, I wonder, “What is the end?”

In my New Testament class, the professor would give us all the potential topics for the midterm and final ahead of time. Then we would calculate how many definitions and essays we actually had to prepare for and pick out the ones that would be easiest to memorize and write about.

Moment of confession, I never picked the ones about the Son of Man and the eschaton, the end times. Compared to the other topics, they were much harder for my brain to pin down, too slippery to wrap my arms around. Also, I associated the end times and the Second Coming with the fundamentalist church that I left. So, if you have a hard time with this, know that you are not the only one.

The Latin roots of the word “advent” means “to come” or “arrival.” In the season of Advent we are preparing for what is to come, for the end. We are preparing both for the first coming of the Messiah, the birth of Jesus, AND for the Second Coming of the Messiah, which will bring about the end of this age.

No one knows when the Second Coming will happen. “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son but only the Father.” The end can come at any time. It can come while we are doing the most ordinary of things, such as eating and drinking. It can come while we are making plans for the future. It can come while we’re working at our desks or preparing a meal.

Despite what the Left Behind books and the guys standing on the corners with giant signs and megaphones try to tell us, we don’t know what the Second Coming will look like. Yes, today’s reading compares it to the Great Flood. It also tells us that one will be taken and one will be left. **But** it doesn’t explicitly say what it means to be the one who is taken or what’s next for the one that is left. There is no criteria and no judgment, except for the baggage that we bring to this passage. It is simply focused on how the end can come suddenly and unexpectedly.

This is true of any kind of end. The end of an age, the end of our lives. The end of the world as we know it, the end of life as we know it. The pandemic is an example of how quickly and how much the world can change without warning. And now Twitter. The same is true of health emergencies and chance meetings. (It would be inconceivable to the Peggy of Advent 2020 that the Peggy of Advent 2022 would be in Austin, engaged to be married, and helping to parent two teenagers.) A sudden fall, a phone call, a text; the world can change in an instant.

We may not know **what** the end will bring, but we know it will bring a new beginning. Any kind of change is hard. Any kind of transition is stressful. How do we prepare ourselves for change? How do we want to react to stress?

Jesus says, “Keep awake.” I don’t think he means we need to work night and day. I don’t think he means we cannot take even a moment to rest.

When Jesus says, “Keep awake,” he is talking about living with the awareness that the end can come at any time, that life can change at any time. So, it is important to prepare for the end. Yes, preparing for the end looks like making sure you have a will that takes care of those who are important to you, and planning your funeral ahead of time.

It also looks like living the kind of life and having the kind of relationships that you will not regret when you are on your deathbed. It looks like being right with God every day, not just on that last day.

Preparing for the end also looks like preparing for new beginnings. It looks like preparing for changes and transitions.

We don’t notice things or do things intentionally when we assume that things aren’t going to change, or that they’re not going to change...much. So, we get caught up in a routine; we choose the path of least resistance.

For example, we may not notice the way smaller endings, small changes and transitions affect us. So, we don’t practice navigating them in a healthy way that enables us to skillfully handle bigger endings, bigger changes and transitions. If we aren’t watching carefully, small issues can build up until they become big issues that are harder to avoid and harder to deal with.

If we are good at helping others and never practice accepting help from others, when the time comes, that will be hard.

If we base our identity on being strong and never notice or acknowledge that being vulnerable is part of being human, the chances and changes of life will hit us hard.

When I was translating Buddhist lectures, my boss<sup>2</sup> Stephanie shared this helpful, if graphic, analogy.

“When we are stressed, it’s as if we’re being squeezed. When an orange is squeezed, we get orange juice. What do we want to come out of **us** when we’re being squeezed? Anger? Resentment? Love? Compassion? That is what we need to be filling ourselves with when we are not being squeezed.”

We need to fill ourselves with Jesus so we can put on the armor of light when we encounter endings, big and small. We need to fill ourselves with Jesus so we can lay aside the works of darkness, the things we do that we want to deny, the things we do that we want to hide.

Filling ourselves with Jesus does NOT look like stuffing ourselves with communion wafers. It looks like learning his ways and walking his paths. It looks like beating swords into ploughshares, spears into pruning hooks; basically, we need to transform tools that cut down into tools that cultivate nourishment. The things we say and do can wound others deeply. The things we think about other people and ourselves can wound ourselves deeply. Those too are weapons we need to be aware of; those too are weapons we need to transform.

Transformation isn't something that happens overnight. It takes practice. This Advent, I'm going to try to preach my first sermon series, and it will be on the topic of a rule of life, and that's what we'll talk about in Adult Education, too.

The first rule of having a rule of life is to talk about having a rule of life.<sup>3</sup> A rule of life gives a community an identity by giving it a shared purpose. A rule of life unites our life of prayer with our life of labor, and a life of labor encompasses everything we do, not just what we do at work. It prepares us for endings and beginnings, by helping us live with intention, with an awareness of self and others.

So, think about what you'd like to be filled with.  
Think about the endings and beginnings you're preparing for.  
Then pick an Advent practice and see where it leads you.

Blessings for your journey through this Advent, and thanks be to God for the presence of fellow pilgrims, living reminders that we do not have to do this alone.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> [T. S. Eliot's "Little Gidding"](#)

<sup>2</sup> Thank you, Stephanie Fan!

<sup>3</sup> Take that, Fight Club!