

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“What Kind of Cloud”

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First Day of Advent

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Luke 21:25-36

25 ‘There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. ²⁶ People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷ Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in a cloud” with power and great glory. ²⁸ Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.’

29 Then he told them a parable: ‘Look at the fig tree and all the trees; ³⁰ as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. ³¹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³² Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. ³³ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

34 ‘Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, ³⁵ like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶ Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.’

This past week someone asked me if I had seen the current motion picture *2012*. The film is the latest end-of-world drama based on the so-called predictions of the ancient Mayan calendar. The calendar ends abruptly near the end of our year of 2012. I responded that I had not seen the movie, nor did I intend to see it. I believe that the real world creates enough anxiety so I don't need a movie depicting the end of the world adding to it all.

Perhaps you don't need to see a movie like *2012* acquire such fear and trembling. The gospel lesson for this first Sunday in Advent paints a scary enough picture. Something is happening here. There are signs in the sun, moon, and stars. People will faint from fear. The powers of heaven will be shaken. The Son of Man will be seen coming in a cloud. When these things take place, stand up and raise your head for the time of your redemption is near. I don't know about you but this isn't the most pleasant reading I have found in Scripture.

During the season of Advent we are called to look forward. Our Hebrew ancestors looked forward to God's action at the end of time to redeem God's people.

The early Christian community looked forward to the imminent return of Jesus Christ to earth. Many people today look forward to the end times as a day in which Jesus will come to reward the faithful and punish those who do not believe. As Christians, we are called to look forward in Advent, to the coming day of God, a day in which peace and justice prevail, between peoples and nations.

It is interesting that the gospel describes Jesus' return in the form of a cloud. As a child I would watch to the west and wish against the afternoon rain clouds which formed, wanting to be able to play my baseball game that night. During the game I would wish for clouds to appear to block out the blinding sun which made it hard to play the outfield.

Clouds. I remember my first plane flight. I was 27 years old, flying from Minneapolis to Grand Rapids for Christmas. When we got above the clouds I was like a small child delighting in the view of the cotton candy swirls below me. When the plane landed those same clouds made everything gray and dreary. The clouds began to drop snow that made the car trip to my parent's home a white-knuckle experience.

Clouds. I remember the summer of 1988 and the drought that plagued central Illinois, where I was ministering. The farmers came to church and prayed for rain to fall from the clouds. They stood in their fields late one July afternoon, in 100 degree temperatures, and watched with great expectations the clouds coming together to bring rain. But those same clouds also brought wind and hail, knocking down part of the few crops which had survived the drought.

Clouds. A book which narrates the development of the atomic bomb is entitled *The Dark Cloud*. The story is one of how idealistic scientists, men and women who were trying to make a better future for humanity, were enlisted to produce the most horrible weapon to threaten humanity.

Joni Mitchell wrote it and I remember Judy Collins singing it:

Bows and flows of angel hair
And ice cream castles in the air
And feather canyons everywhere,
I've looked at clouds that way.
But now they only block the sun
They rain and snow on everyone
So many things I would have done,
But clouds got in my way.
I've looked at clouds from both sides now...

Today we begin the season of Advent. It comes with a cloud on the horizon. It is difficult to understand what kind of cloud this coming brings. Is it darkness, fear and dread? Or is it a promise of hope and peace? Advent is a season that heralds for many a celebration of wonder and joy. Yet for others it is a time of senseless busyness, obligation, and sadness. A cloud is on the way. What kind of cloud will it be?

Perhaps a cloud is an appropriate image for the beginning of this Advent season of preparation, for this is a season of challenge and promise. Luke's picture of the end days paint a different picture for everyone who look at it. Some might see it as a dark and frightening sky. Others might view it as warm and beautiful. For a world that seeks its own comfort as its goal and builds its own security through the accumulation of power and possession this is a time to be afraid. God is ready to challenge our accepted notions and move us to a change that will mean good will for all. For a world

that is anxious and weary, bloodied and confused, this is a time to be hopeful. God is ready to inaugurate a new world, one based on mercy, justice, and compassion.

What kind of cloud is this? What does this Advent season mean? As we wait in this season of uncertainty, as we live out our lives in times of worry and doubt, we can know this. The cloud that is the presence of God is always a cloud of challenge and promise. It is the call of God to prepare our hearts, our minds, and our lives for God's presence to be born. It is the assurance that when all is said and done, God will reign in us, in our home and nation and earth and seas and skies and the entire cosmos. We do not know the day nor the hour, but we can know that the Lord who comes to us on upon the clouds is the one in whom we already live and move and have our being. It is the God who challenges us to create a better future by being faithful in our actions today.