

Sermon for Sunday, November 29, 2015  
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY  
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

Today  
is the beginning of a new year  
here in the church.  
We begin a month before the rest of the world,  
with four weeks of preparation,  
four weeks of getting ready  
for the birth of Christ, Jesus Emmanuel, God with us,  
the One at the center of our faith and the reason that we gather here  
week by week  
to worship.

But what a way to begin!

“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. People will faint from fear and foreboding for what is coming upon the world.”

It's not very positive, is it? Signs in the sky, terror on the earth. Not exactly the fireworks and parties that we begin with at midnight on January 1. Not exactly the way we would expect to celebrate the beginning of another year.

And yet, it looks pretty realistic to me. We might have gone beyond expecting to see earthly events reflected in the movements of planets and stars, but you only have to look at the newspaper or turn on the TV, to see story after story of a world struggling and groaning.

A plane shot down  
in the Sinai,  
suicide bombers in a market place in Beirut,  
the attacks in Paris,  
and just this week,  
hostages taken in a hotel in Mali.  
And meanwhile  
tensions are escalating in the Middle East.

A Russian fighter plane  
shot down by Turkey,  
bombing raids  
by a coalition of forces in Syria,  
and underneath it all  
a quarter of the population of Syria  
fleeing the violence  
in fear of their lives,  
a seemingly unstoppable tide of refugees  
flooding Europe.  
And closer to home, in Colorado Springs,  
a gunman leaves nine wounded and three dead.

And the sad thing is,  
none of this is new.  
Twelve years ago,  
when I preached on this same text  
in my previous parish  
The world seemed to be losing the fight against AIDS;  
suspected terrorists had been arrested in Italy, Germany and Britain;  
soldiers and civilians alike were being killed in Afghanistan and Iraq;  
and here at home  
there was an endless litany of burglaries and murders.  
The details may have been different  
but the struggles were the same.

Our world is a sorry place, a place groaning under the weight of evil.  
As if we needed anyone to tell us. It's all around us.

But what we do need someone to tell us, what is really important, is that this is not all  
there is to life. Struggle and pain and death  
is not the ultimate end  
toward which everything is heading.  
Even though it seems like it, sometimes.  
There is more to life, both on this earth  
and beyond.

Because beyond the pain  
is the promise of God,  
beyond the struggle

is God's justice.

We don't see it now,

but we will see it

in the long run.

But when we see these signs of evil, we will know that God is near.

It sounds kind of contradictory, it doesn't really make sense. Because we normally expect things to get gradually better. We look for signs of improvement in the economy — lower unemployment, an increase in the stock market — in the hope that we will return to boom times soon. We watch someone gradually gain strength, as they begin the slow path of recovery from an accident or illness. There are many things in this world that do get gradually, slowly better. That's the pattern of growth.

But there are also times,

when in order to get better, they must be worse. Like a rising fever, that finally breaks.

The pain of labor, before the wonderful event of the birth of a child.

The intensifying battle, those final hours of desperation before it is finally won.

This battle image is one that appears in scripture quite often, especially in the book of Revelation. Because we are in a battle of sorts, though it's not a battle we talk about very often.

It's the ultimate battle between good and evil, between the things of God and the things that oppose God. It's a battle of cosmic proportions, but a battle that ends up being fought in the world around us

and even in ourselves. We're all caught up in it. Every time we make a choice

between something is good

and something that is bad. Or more commonly

between something that is good, and something that is not so good, or between something that is not good

and something that is much worse.

We like to think of it

as a battle drawn with very clear lines,

good over here and bad over there,

and to an extent that's true —

we've certainly got God over here on the good side

and the forces that opposed God

over there on the bad.

But there's an awful lot of stuff  
somewhere in the middle, and awful lot of stuff  
that is neither totally good  
nor totally bad.

Sometimes they're ordinary things,  
part of our everyday life that we don't even think of in terms of good or bad, that we  
don't consider to have any moral value.  
Like cars — they are a wonderful invention that allows us to travel quickly and safety  
over long distances.  
But they also  
We'd probably put them on the good side. But ask the people who have lost family  
members in car accidents, or who have asthma from pollution, or who live in countries  
affected by the hole in the ozone layer. For them, cars have a clearly bad side as well.

Or food. We need it to live. But there are some kinds of food that are more good for us  
than others, some that taste good but predispose us to health problems, and others that  
taste bad but are good for us. And some foods are good for some people but deadly to  
others. So I guess food goes on the good side, for the most part, but at times ends up on  
the bad.

It doesn't quite work, does it, this nice neat dividing of the world into good and evil.  
Because it's a whole lot more complex than that. Good and evil are all muddled up  
together, and sometimes it's hard to tell them apart.

As we've seen so clearly  
in the Middle East over the last decade.  
The military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan  
crippled Al Qaeda,  
but with the loss of central powers  
and the instability that went along with the flowering of democracy in the Arab Spring  
came the rise  
of extremist militants,  
and vast numbers of refugees  
trying to escape.

Good and evil are all mixed together,  
one spilling over into the other,

a cosmic struggle  
brought down to earth.

So is there any hope? Or are we doomed to be in this struggle for ever?

The answer, of course, is no  
and it is that answer that makes the Christian New Year of Advent so different from the  
New Year of January 1. On the first day of January, we wake up with New year's  
resolutions on our minds, and all too often, a hangover on our brain. There is hope  
of a kind  
but it's totally up to us.  
Whether this year is better than the last  
depends on whether we,  
and the millions of other people making similar promises to themselves  
manage to keep them.

But on the first day of the New Year for the church, on Advent Sunday  
our hope is tied not to what we can do, but what God has done, and is doing and will  
continue to do.

The world might look like it is spiraling downwards,  
but God is at work, God is on the move among us,  
and it is certain beyond all certainty  
that good will prevail,  
that the Kingdom of God is near.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu said it well, after his own experience of the evil of apartheid:  
Goodness is stronger than evil;  
Love is stronger than hate;  
Light is stronger than darkness;  
Life is stronger than death;  
Victory is ours through him who loves us.

We are waiting, this Advent season, we are waiting  
for the coming of Christ. And we are waiting  
with certainty  
that good will prevail, that God will prevail.  
And so we stand firm,  
and lift up our heads,  
pointing towards  
the one who will be born, Jesus

Emmanuel,  
God with us.  
Because our  
our God is at hand, a still point  
in the maelstrom of struggle.  
a sign of hope for bleeding, fearful  
world.  
Alleluia, come Lord Jesus.