

Sermon for the First Sunday of Advent
The Rev. Megan Dembi

Reading the Gospel reminded me of a song by Nickel Creek called the 21st of May. If you've never heard this song, it tells the story of Harold Camping, who was a Christian radio star, and how, as many of you probably remember, Camping predicted that the world would end on May 21st, 2011. The song is written as if it were Camping who was speaking, and features lines like, "They laughed when Noah built his boat, but cried when came the rain. They mock me now but I will float on the 21st of May." The song even pokes fun at the fact that Camping had already made an end of the world prediction for September of 1994. "Well I've never been so sure and I've never led no one astray, 'cept in the fall of '94, but hallelujah, the 21st of May." Obviously neither of these predictions came true. Both September 1994 and May 21st, 2011 passed and the world still turned as it normally does. And that's not surprising when we read passages like today's gospel.

Jesus tells the disciples no one knows the day or the hour of judgment day, not even angels or even God the Son. Both the Gospels and the Epistles are insistent that no one will know when the day of judgment comes—that it will come like a thief in the night, completely unexpected. Yet this hasn't stopped Harold Camping and other Christians throughout history (some of whom had big followings) from trying to predict when the second coming of Christ will occur. So why are there so many people making predictions in spite of Gospel and Pauline epistles saying it's impossible?

I think some of it stems from a place of self-importance. I think some of these people who make predictions want to be a part of the end times. They want to be one of the people who gets to see Jesus in the flesh before they die. Or maybe they want to be the first Christian in about 2000 years to get the day and the hour right. Perhaps these predictors believe they alone were capable of figuring out the date Christ will return to earth even though Christ claimed that he himself wouldn't know the time. But I think there is a stronger motivation at work when various people make these end time predictions—and that is fear. I think people making these predictions are doing so at least partially out of fear—fear that they and others aren't good enough Christians, but they just have to get their act together before the projected judgment day. Or perhaps they are motivated by fear of death- they would rather be lifted into heaven while alive than to face the mystery that awaits us after this life. Or perhaps it comes from fear of uncertainty—they want to know exactly when the second coming of Christ will happen and whether they are going to be a part of it. There's almost an innate desire for people to find certainty in uncertain times

And even though most of us have probably never put in much effort in predicting when the second coming of Christ will occur, I think we can all relate to these kinds of fear—Fear that we are not good enough, that we are not good enough Christians. Fear of uncertainty—being afraid of what the future has in store for us, our families, our communities, and our world. And

we can certainly relate to the fear of death, as none of us knows when and how our own earthly lives will end. Yet being a Christian means embracing both certainty and uncertainty, both hope and fear, and we are reminded of this especially in Advent.

In Advent, we are both waiting and preparing—waiting and preparing for Christ’s birth, which we are certain of since it has already happened. And waiting and preparing for Christ’s coming again, which we are certain of, but we’re uncertain of when it will happen or exactly what it will be like. We fear the unknown, but we have hope in what we have been promised through Christ. The disciples, too, had to wrestle with the same feelings of certainty and uncertainty, fear and hope. The events from the Gospel took place after Jesus had foretold his death and had entered into Jerusalem where he would eventually be crucified. The disciples were certain that Jesus would die and knew that he was coming again and had hope in that, but they were already concerned about the loss of him. Though they knew Jesus would still be with them, a part of them was still uncertain, still afraid. Jesus had also told them immediately before the passage we heard that could expect to be persecuted for their faith. They were unsure about whether they themselves would lose their lives for following Christ. And they wanted reassurance from Jesus so that they would know exactly what to expect. They wanted to have a sign so that they would know that Jesus would be with them, even after his death.

But Jesus does not tell the disciples exactly what to expect—they had to remain uncertain about some things, including when and how the end times would take place. But even though Jesus doesn’t tell the disciples exactly what they can expect, he DOES tell the disciples what they should DO. Rather than focusing on the “when” of his second coming, he tells them what they should do in the meantime—keep awake, be alert. Do the good works that Christians are supposed to do regardless of the when the judgment day is and when their own lives will end.

Like the disciples, sometimes we feel like we need assurance of Christ’s presence with us. When times are uncertain due to illness, lack of income, loss of loved ones, or events in our community, country, and in our world that frighten us, we often wish for a sign from God so that we know might know what to expect and be reassured. We can start spending too much time worrying about the uncertain things in life. Yet Jesus teaches the disciples and teaches us that we don’t need signs in order to know that Christ is present with us and to know what we should be doing with our lives—trying love God and love our neighbors as ourselves. Like the owner of the house that may be broken into—if we’re doing what we should be doing, it doesn’t matter when the thief in the night will come, we won’t have to worry about it.

This is a great lesson for us to learn. Life is full of both certainty and uncertainty, with both fear and hope. And it makes sense that uncertainty brings about fear—we fear the unknown, we fear being unprepared. Like many of those Christians who foretold the date of judgment day, we likely are afraid of the end times, whether that’s the end of all things that the Gospel was speaking of, or the ends of our earthly lives. Because none of us knows when we are going to die. Those of us who are young are not guaranteed another 5 decades, and those of us who are older cannot be certain that we won’t outlive even our much younger relatives and

friends. Jesus teaches us that focusing on fear and uncertainty is not helpful and asks a simple but important question in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And the answer is no. Worrying won't gain us anything. In fact, we can only gain from NOT being so preoccupied with what we're uncertain of; of instead living in hopefulness of the promise of eternal life that we have been given through Christ. What would change if we were to stop worrying so much and instead accept all of life's uncertainties? Would we appreciate things more? Friends and family and all that we have? Would we take less for granted? Would we work harder to help others in need and do God's work in the world? What would we be able to accomplish if we weren't so focused on those things we are uncertain of?

We are reminded in this season of Advent, that there are some things that we will just HAVE to be uncertain about. Yet even though we are uncertain about some things, we can be certain about a much more important thing—that Christ is always with us, and eventually, at an hour on a day that no one knows, Christ will come again. Amen.