

**Advent 1C**

**November 28, 2021**

**Solemn Mass**

**The Church of Saint Mary the Virgin**

**by the Reverend James Ross Smith**

*Zechariah 14:1–9; Psalm 50:1–6;*

*1 Thessalonians 3:9–13; Luke 21:25–36*

From the thirteenth chapter of the Gospel of Mark, “Jesus said to his disciples, “For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs” (13:8).

On the afternoon of March 17, 1959, my pregnant mother realized that she needed to get to the hospital, and soon. She was not inexperienced in these matters. This was her sixth child. She was unable to reach my father, so she walked the two blocks to the local hospital by herself. When she arrived at the emergency room, she was taken upstairs right away. She delivered my youngest brother two hours later. All of this—my mother’s stoicism and the swiftness of the delivery—became the stuff of family legend. To me and my brothers, our mother seemed very brave and very tough, and we may have assumed that, with a little practice, childbirth was not such a hard thing after all.

All these years later, I realize how very ignorant we were. My mother, forty-two back then, must have felt apprehensive, worried, and lonely as she walked to the hospital that day.

After all, is giving birth ever easy?

Time is unpredictable in the New Testament. Sometimes things get urgent. Then the biblical texts seem to be saying, Wake up, pay attention, wash your face; put down the bottle. Your life is not stretching out gently, endlessly into the future. No, in the Bible, when life gets apocalyptic, time contracts to a pinpoint. There is either *right now* or a *right now* in a future that is just dying to break in, an unexpected, irreversible rupture in time and space; and out of that rupture there is an advent. God comes. God comes up close to his people. And in the apocalyptic vision, the advent of God is often preceded by chaos, disturbance, and distress.

Is giving birth ever easy?

This is true of Mark 13, and it is true of the first half of the chapter 21 in Luke, the passage that comes just before this morning's appointed passage. Here in Luke, there is also warfare, famine, and earthquake. But along with all this there is hatred, persecution, and betrayal.

The disciple can no longer count on the bonds of family, and her personal distress is magnified by the distress going on all around her. Jerusalem is attacked and destroyed. Everyone must flee the city. Some die by the sword. Some are enslaved. The time of the Gentiles' victory has begun.

After reading all this, we arrive at today's gospel passage. Apocalyptic events continue but things shift from social upheaval to something else. Now the apocalypse, the revelation, is cosmic. Sun, moon, stars, and sea are affected. Nature itself is in labor; and then, finally, there is God, "They will see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near" (Luke 21:27–28).

What we are hearing in the twenty-first chapter of Luke is a mixture, or better, a linkage between history and vision. Jerusalem and its Temple were destroyed in AD 70, forty years after Jesus' death. That is history, and Luke knew it. But the apocalyptic events of the past are linked to Jesus' apocalyptic vision of the future. And hearing that vision, we acknowledge that Jesus has not yet returned. The final redemption has not taken place. And so we watch and we wait: Jesus says, "Stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is

drawing near.” That last phrase is beautiful and essential: the Christian calling is to love and be loved by the One who is always drawing near. We give thanks for the One who blesses us in the present, and we also wait with hope for the One who is to come.

Luke deals with this tension, first, by embedding words of comfort and reassurance within his distressing vision: Jesus says, you may be hated, but not a hair of your head will perish; and by your endurance you will gain your lives (21:18–19). But most important, at the very beginning of his gospel, Luke tells us about another vision, the vision to the shepherds, “But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

This is the first advent, a quiet but very real tear in time and space. The Messiah comes as a poor, weak, and decidedly unroyal child. This is an advent so subtle that it goes almost unnoticed.

But is any birth ever easy?

Before too very long, Jesus will proclaim and embody the advent of God’s Reign. He will encounter resistance. He will suffer and he will die. But he will

also show us that God’s advent is a living, breathing, present thing, not just a vision about the future. The Son of man may one day return as Judge, but this Judge is the Jesus who we have come to know. Jesus is the One who saves by forgiving, healing, and reconciling. Jesus comes to fix and repair, not just to condemn or reject. That is why he is our Hope, and that is why we wait for him. That is why we say, “Lord Jesus, come!”

We live in apocalyptic times: there is plague, flood, fire, storm, famine, warfare, hatred, and discord. This is real and undeniable. But Jesus would not have us surrender to our fears or worst nightmares. Jesus has come, is coming, and will come to us again and again. And so, we wait, and we do our best to *live* while we wait. The meaning of this season is to see blessing in the manger, and so to look for blessing in unexpected places and not to give up—“by your endurance you will gain your lives.”

John Henry Newman put it this way over a hundred years ago, “He watches for Christ who has a sensitive, eager, [perceptive] mind; who is awake, alive, quick-sighted, zealous in seeking and honouring Him; who looks out for Him *in all that happens*, and who would not be surprised, who would not be over-agitated or

overwhelmed, if he found that He was coming at once.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Newman, John Henry, Sermon 22, “Watching,” in *Parochial and Plain Sermons*. I am very grateful to the Sisters of Saint Margaret, who drew my attention to this quote, which they published on their Instagram account on Saturday, November 27, 2021.