

December 2, 2018  
First Sunday of Advent  
Luke 21:25-36  
Pr. Craig Mueller

## What Will Become of Us?

*What will become of us?* How will our future unfold? What about your future? Are you on tiptoes—you can't wait. Or are you freaking out and filled with fear? Maybe it's proportional to how much you read the news!

*What will become of us?* We may wonder or worry about love and work and money. Will we be alone? Will we have enough to live on and then enough for retirement? Will we have the inner resources to face life's trials? Will we face addiction or depression? And what about those we love? How will life work out for them?

*What will become of us?* Scientists are beginning to realize that what sets us apart from other animals is that we contemplate the future. This foresight created civilization and propels society forward. Our future-mindedness is usually energizing. But it is also the source of most depression and anxiety—whether we are pondering our own lives or worrying about the country. While other animals have springtime rituals for educating their young, we subject our own to “commencement” speeches that remind the graduate: today is the first day of the rest of your life. Researchers used to think that our hang-ups were about unresolved issues from our past, but now they are realizing that looking into the future—consciously or unconsciously—is a key function of our oversized brain.

*What will become of us?* It was certainly on the mind of our spiritual ancestors. So many scripture passages begin with phrases like “the days are surely coming” or “in those days.” When life is hard, you want to believe that good times are on the way! That things are going to get better. The prophet Jeremiah anticipates a future when God's promises will be fulfilled. A righteous branch will spring up. The Lord will come and establish justice in the land.

Jesus' words about the end of the world can awaken fear about the future—or they can be a picture of a world always on the brink of war or disaster. Signs in the sun, moon and the stars. Distress about what is coming on the world. And words that sound eerie in this time of climate change—“the roaring of the sea and the waves.”

There seems to always be a disaster in the news: a mass shooting, a hurricane, a forest fire. It's surprising there's not a cable Disaster Channel. Students around the country are beginning to realize shootings could happen anywhere, even in their school. After the Tree of Life synagogue shooting, someone asked me if we have a disaster plan here at Holy Trinity.

*What will become of us?* One of my favorite Advent hymns includes the phrase: *Shine your future on this place*. But is there hope for the future? Our faith says yes, and we want that kind of hope to rub off on us.

But some grandparents this week told me they worry about the future of the planet for their young grandchildren. News this week that life expectancy is decreasing in this country due to deaths by opioids and suicides. Though we are living through the second longest economic recovery in this country's history, according to a recent “well-being” index, a majority of us are not happy. Instead we are in a social crisis. More and more people lack a sense of purpose and connection to community.

*What will become of us?* Sometimes it's easier to change the subject, eat a carton of ice cream, and binge watch a Netflix show.

Last summer I read a great novel called *The Immortalists*. In 1969 four children are living on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. They go to a psychic who tells them—one by one—the day they will die. *What will become of us*, that's what they wonder. Throughout the novel, each of the four children deals with the psychic's prediction, in their own way. The oldest sibling lives the longest and is also a longevity researcher. Yet she has plenty of “issues.” Late in the story, she wishes she had paid more attention to the small things in life. She comes to realize that her deepest desire is not to live forever, but to stop worrying. The novel causes us to wonder: is living a longer life necessarily a better life?

*What will become of us?* I got this sermon mantra from a New York Times magazine several weeks back. The subtitle: *How Technology is Changing What It Means to Be Human*. Each article peered into the future in a different way. Artificial intelligence. How proteins in our body are now used to predict future diseases. And the recent scientific discovery that our brains are incredibly active when we are doing nothing, so to speak. If we never unplug, our minds never have time to wander. We need this “time travel,” so to speak, to imagine the future in creative ways. The brain needs such “deep learning” to integrate our past experiences and emotional contours while imagining future prospects. You could say we need a dose of Advent to teach us how to wait.

As we worry about what will become of us, there is compassion in Jesus’ voice as he adds: Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life. Be alert. Be awake. Be watchful. Pay attention to what is most important. Since you’re not going to live forever, make each day count. Beginning today.

Advent is a unique spiritual season when we connect to God’s dream for the future. Through the words of the prophets, through the liturgy, and especially at the eucharist—we taste God’s promises for what is yet to be. Here, amid our Advent waiting, God’s future already breaks in upon us. Calming our fears. Centering us in grace. Assuring us that we are okay, that we are enough, that we will have what we need to meet whatever tomorrow brings.

In the midst of your future-phobias, open your eyes. There are signs in the sun, moon and stars. Winter landscapes. Bare branches. Long nights. Nature calling us to go inward. And to gently hold our common mortality and vulnerability.

What will become of us? Heaven and earth will pass away. Yet there will always be holy surprises. Raise your heads. Your redemption is drawing nigh. God will be faithful. The future is now. And Christ is coming. Christ is here.