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.”

_Dr. Steven P. Eason_  

_People: Thanks be to God!_

* Are you sure you are thankful for that? Sounds scary. It’s in the Bible, Jesus will come again. That’s what Advent says.

When we lived in Mount Pleasant, S.C., I belonged to a men’s bible study that would take a journey every Christmas Eve morning to the 7:00 a.m. Mass at Mepkin Abbey. It’s a Trappist monastery near Moncks Corner.

The monks would come in from the chicken houses where they had been bagging fertilizer and processing eggs, put on their robes over their jeans and tennis shoes, and quickly move into one of their many worship services during the course of the day.

It was Christmas Eve morning, but there were no Christmas decorations in the quaint chapel. There were no Christmas carols sung. There were chants and biblical readings, mainly prophesies, prayers for the world, followed by the eucharist. That was it, except for one thing.

There was a dead tree branch, 10 to 12 feet tall, planted in a large bucket that sat next to the communion table. It was the “Jesse Tree,” a tradition based upon Isaiah’s prophecy:

_A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. (Isaiah 11:1)_
Jesse was the father of King David, the greatest king Israel ever had. The Messiah would come from the lineage of David.

That was it! No ornaments, no lights, no nothing. Just a dead stump coming out of a pot. When I asked one of the monks about it, he quietly said, “Well, that’s Advent. It’s a time of waiting. A time of hope. Out of a dead branch will come what God has promised!”

Who doesn’t need to hear that? Even if you don’t believe it, you want to hear it. Could it be true? Could we hope for that? Advent does.

The word “advent” literally means, “the arrival of a notable person, thing, or event.” Advent does acknowledge the first coming of Christ, but it looks beyond that. Advent looks for the second coming of Christ.

Is that what we’re doing? Do we even believe that is true? We say in the creed, “…from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.” It’s one thing to say it, but do we actually expect that to happen? It seems so illogical. Signs in the sun, and the moon, and the stars? People fainting. Jesus coming in on a cloud? Are we to take all that literally, or figuratively, or not at all?

On the other hand, it is hard to imagine that the earth, full of life, is floating in empty space without meaning, or purpose, or divine attention or direction. That also seems illogical, so random. Surely this is not all there is.

Advent says God is up to something. Advent HOPES. Advent stares at a dead stump waiting for just one tiny bud to sprout out of it. We hope that God is at work in this world, even though we may not see it, or understand it. We hope all this is not random, or lost. We hope in the promises of God.

Henry Nouwen wrote,

Hope is the trust that God will fulfill God’s promises to us in a way that leads us to true freedom. (Nouwen, Bread for the Journey, January 16.)

But how do you hang on to those promises when things never seem to change? How do you hope against all the facts, all the odds? How do you imagine a different kind of future when there is no evidence for that future?

Fred Craddock wrote,

Hope seems to need only one calorie a day to survive. (Craddock, “Hope is a Baby in the Straw,” The Disciple, December 1992, p. 54)

And sometimes that’s all it gets! But sometimes that’s enough.
What are you hoping for on this first Sunday of Advent? Do we dare hope for peace; for a world that is less angry and violent, where all children are safe, and the elderly do not live in fear? Would we dare hope for a world in which we respect one another in our diversity and celebrate our unity?

Maybe it’s closer to home. We hope for our children and for our grandchildren. We hope for healing and reconciliation where relationships are torn and broken. We hope for forgiveness and second chances. We hope to change. We hope our lives matter. We hope all this is headed somewhere and it’s not all in vain. We even hope for heaven!

It’s a matter of faith, but we believe that God came to us in Christ. Christmas celebrates that. Advent is looking ahead. When’s he coming back? When will the world be fully and completely redeemed by God’s love? When will a tiny green leaf sprout from a dead stump in a bucket?

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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.” (Luke 21:27-28)

With those words, and in that hope, we begin Advent at the Table of Christ, until he comes again.
In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Congregation: Amen