



“Signs and Wonders”

GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC

Sunday, December 1, 2024, Advent #1

The Rev. Dr. Marcia Whitney Mount Shoop, Pastor

"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 of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth.

Clouds are heaven's tea leaves
All laid out for everyone to see
No squinting into the dark crevices
Of ceramic sorcery
But necks craned looking for God's
Arrival in the shifting mists of real time.

We've been waiting, God, for the
coming of the Lord we've cooked up
in our heads, in our hearts, in our dreads,
in our smarts, in our wishful thinking
in our feelings sinking further and further
into a haze of inklings that God must
be planning something big,

an entrance that will grab us
by our attention, in our intentions
in our dissensions and circumventions.

We look to the clouds like
hieroglyphics, like ancient code
with secret honorifics for
Divine comings and goings
doings and beings
seeings and believings
as if God is made of vapor
as if God is not someone we
can see more clearly in our
neighbor, than a bunch of
water molecules floating in the sky.

The Son of Man coming in the clouds
is who we're waiting for these days?
That's a question, not a proclamation,
not an exclamation, not a declaration.
It's a sign of our times and our species
that we expect someone to save us all.
That we hope God will come and fix it.
That we figure we just need to commit
to the way things have always been
and keep putting thing back together
the same way they were again.

It's no wonder we've lost our bearings
our pairings, our sharings, our daring
to believe that God lives and breathes
in the grit and in the pain,
on the washed out paths,
in the eleventh hours that wax and wane.

While we lose track of each other
and the whole point of life on earth.

While we forget that we are kin.
While we make the same mistakes
over and over and over again.
We build walls and put up barriers.
We make the world less safe, not better.
We sift through the rubble looking for
life, looking for something to tell us
where to turn, how to rekindle some
reason this all makes sense.
We get lost in the truth that
stares us right in the face.
The purpose of life is the
healing of the human race.
The big entrance we're longing for
may be a distraction from the
God-given capacity we all have
for every day miracles of Love's
unrelenting belief in our best possibility.

Clouds are so fleeting, so hard to
hold onto. They float and they drift
they get lost in the winds. They empty
themselves into the rivers and oceans.
They pool and they swirl, they
gather up steam and they hover
in mountain crooks like blankets
that makes roads hard to travel, that
obscure our vision and unravel our
best laid plans—the plans that told us
life should be this way or that.

We come to these mountain passes
and life twists and it turns,
it shape shifts and yearns.
Storms bare down on the things
that we knew, the things we
were building, the things we

had thought were true.
The things we expected, the things
we projected—the ways we put
our hopes in the ones who
get elected.

Advent is the pause, the space
to consider. The moment to take
stock of what you expect God will
deliver. Advent is waiting with
expectation. It's preparing with
specific direction. Advent is noticing,
it's giving some energy to focusing
on the dreams we share, the ones
we dare to believe in, the ones that
disappear in our wakefulness
because we were too busy to notice
the ways we build life on the
things that provoke us to
despise the softest parts of ourselves.
The pieces that need the most
tenderness often get the
harshest treatment instead.
And we walk with the dread.
We listen to the voices in our head
that teach us to fly low and
avoid healing opportunities.
We are bent toward survival, even
when it turns us into our own rival.
Even when it teaches us to
leave God behind. When it teaches us
to trust in the twists and turns of our
own mind.

Lean not on your own understanding,
the prophets have warned. There is more to
this journey than lost hopes to be mourned.

The life of faith is about improvisation.
It's about finding God in the current situation.
It's about building life from pieces and parts,
from ashes and false starts. From the
things we thought we learned, but we had not.
From the unexpected startle in the middle of
the night. Advent is the vehicle,
not the map.

Advent is the way we learn to be faithful.
It's our best hope in times like these—
like times have always been—
Each generation holds the key
that can finally show us the way.
Each generation will not pass away
without all things being revealed,
without all things coming clear
that had been concealed.

You see every generation fears we may be the last
Every generation figures we better get things
right fast. And every generation is right
and wrong all at once. Every generation looks
up when they needed to look around. Every generation
sees hopes dashed and new worlds being born.

Faith will not fix the things that cause us pain.
But faith gives us a fighting chance to
see something promising in what remains.
We're in this together, may be the message
that connects our humanity with the shifting,
sifting clouds. We're made of the same impulses to gather
and release, to hover and to mold ourselves into the
container we've been given.

How will we watch this particular Advent season
for the wonders and signs that are calling us

to see and believe?
What scales need to fall from our eyes?
What about a sanctuary full of supplies
can give us the wisdom of the ages?
What about the play books of the
past allow us to finally turn several pages?

Stop and take a long look at the
truth of uprooted trees.
Pause with your pain and allow
it to speak truth to you
about your neighbor's pain, too.
Don't sleep on the wonder of
the winter night sky and
the silence the envelopes
us when we truly try to listen.
Walk with your fears with
the deep compassion you have
always longed for and see
where that courage can take you.
Let your imagination stretch into
this very moment with
an eye for how God is
with us in the unraveling,
in the time traveling, in the
dismantling, in the shattering,
in the scattering and in the gathering.

The tragedy of the human family is
more about the opportunities we've missed
than the histories we insist tell the story
of us. This year, let the familiar fold into
something you may not expect, and
make room in your spirit for all
God's promises kept in the great unfolding
of our shared sorrow. That's the pregnant
hope for a better tomorrow.