

# Earth-shattering Expectations

*A sermon on Luke 21:25-36 by Nathan Nettleton, 2 December 2018*

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## Message

The coming of Christ to transform the present world into the Kingdom of God will be earth-shattering, but we easily lose sight of it in our anticipation of “another Christmas”.

## Sermon

“Christmas is coming.” I’m sure that hasn’t escaped you. In my local supermarket, Christmas goods started appearing in mid-September, and by now they dominate the displays in several aisles. I’m already sick of the gaudy sight of it.

I’m rather a Scrooge when it comes to Christmas festivities, and so I normally stand here at the beginning of Advent and remind you that Advent is not Christmas, and that it is not only about anticipating and preparing for Christmas. And it’s not. But it is about that too, and I’ve been persuaded to try to lay aside my prejudices a little this year and explore some of the preparing-for-Christmas dimensions of this season of Advent.

That doesn’t mean we are about to start singing Christmas carols or putting up pictures of Santa visiting the manger in the stable. We’re preparing, but we’re not there yet.

The readings for this first Sunday of Advent probably seem about as un-Christmasy as you can get. They’ve got much more of an earth-shattering end of the world thing going on. Especially the reading from Luke’s gospel:

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.

Un-Christmasy perhaps, but they do have a lot to say about anticipation and expectation, and perhaps they seem un-Christmasy because our concept of Christmas has itself broken loose from its moorings and become something other than the gospel.

These words about traumatic chaos that shakes the earth should be sounding different to our generation. Not because it is entirely new. Sure, when people in Alaska today hear Jesus say that “there will be great earthquakes”, they will be thinking he could have been referring to yesterday. And when the people in churches in Sulawesi hear these words today – “nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves” – they will hear them in a particularly poignant way, but tsunamis are not new, and neither are earthquakes and cyclones and bush fires.

Sydney hasn’t had a tsunami, but it rained so hard up there last week that when people posted fake photos of the harbour bridge turned into a waterfall, a lot of Sydney-siders fell for it and thought they were real. Such was the downpour that the pictures seemed believable. But that

fact that we refer to such downpours as being of “biblical proportions” reminds us that freak storms have been going on for a very long time.

But although extreme weather events are not new, our generation has an understanding of why they are becoming more frequent and more violent and more extreme. We can see that they are not just isolated incidents, but that there is an escalating pattern. The climate is changing, the extremes are more violent, and we know that we have brought it on ourselves.

This is something that the average school child can understand well enough to take to the streets over. But as the federal government has demonstrated over and over in the past few years, knowing how to face it and what to do about it is an entirely different thing. The last thing our conservative government wants to do is inspire a new generation of placard waving political activists, but as we saw on Friday, their paralysis over what to do is achieving just that. The prospect of changing ourselves can be more traumatic than enduring the change that goes on, seemingly out of our control, all around us.

But these two changes are far from unrelated. Jesus uses the images of planetary and climactic chaos not so much for their own sake, but to warn us of the earth-shattering nature of the changes that are coming upon us with his coming into the world. Everything that Jesus is on about is so different from the present ways the world operates, that it makes the kind of changes needed to halt the pace of climate change look like small potatoes.

When the ways of Jesus begin to seriously impact on the world, it will be traumatic, tumultuous, earth-shattering. Kingdoms will crumble. Empires will fall. Great political parties will tear themselves asunder. Financial institutions will go into meltdown and be publicly humiliated. Powerful nations will be mired in senseless unwinnable wars. The earth will be shaken to its foundations.

Does that sound like our expectations of Christmas? No? Well perhaps it should. The reason it doesn't is that we have reduced the story of Christ's coming to a cute baby story and largely erased from memory even the aspects of the baby story that foreshadowed the chaos and trauma that his coming into the world was going to cause.

The shepherds and the wise men are popular stories, but who wants to hear that the reigning dictator went ballistic and despatched the death squads to kill all the babies to make sure that this baby could not have a chance to shake the earth to its foundations? That one doesn't fit Christmas's family friendly G-rated image.

Social psychologists say that one of the ways that we react to threatening news which we feel powerless to do anything about is to ignore it, to suppress it from consciousness so that we become oblivious to it, and that one of the ways that we do that is to distract ourselves from it with entertainments and consumption and festivities and intoxicants. In other words, we party ourselves into oblivion.

And what did Jesus say in the reading we heard? “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.” Dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life. In other words, compulsive partying and mind-numbing intoxication and keeping up with the lifestyle indicators and socially expected patterns of festive consumption.

In our prayers of confession at this time of year, we acknowledge that we are prone to reducing our preparation for Christ's coming to reckless expense and trivialities. Perhaps it is no wonder. It is difficult not to get caught up in the massive wave of consumption and partying that engulfs our world at this time of year. But, says Jesus, be on your guard. He's not saying that you can't go to parties or buy Christmas presents, but he is warning against doing so mindlessly and just surrendering to the escapism of it all.

The Christmas we anticipate and prepare for is not just the festivities that celebrate the birth of a baby. The baby is an important part of the story and of the message, but the usual tendency is to freeze it there and allow nothing that would disrupt the sentimentality and festive cycle of it.

The Christmas we anticipate and prepare for is more than that. It is also the beginning of the end. It is also the breaking in of a new world which will shake the earth to its foundations and bring many of its cherished institutions crashing down.

The Christmas we anticipate and prepare for is the celebration of the God who becomes flesh in the fragile promise of a baby yet unborn, but whose birthing labour pains cause the whole earth to shudder and heave, for what is being born is not just a new baby, but a new world, a new culture, and new way of being. What is being born is life itself; is freedom and hope and healing and promise. What is being born is the new day of justice when all the world is set free from its enemies and salvation is made flesh.

And for the coming of that day on this, we work and pray!