

The First Sunday in Advent
29 November 2009
Luke 21:25-36
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SHAKE OR STIR?

Shake or stir? That is the question for today. You're probably thinking of mixed drinks. I'm certainly not an expert on that. But a few of you probably know the quote from the movie *Auntie Mame*: "Patrick dear, always stir a martini, never shake or you will bruise the gin."

The first Sunday of Advent always shakes things up. Decorations in stores and on street corners would tell us that Christmas is in full gear. But there is no cheery red and green in here. Rather, bare branches and reflective blue. Messages of waiting and restraint. Talk about being out of step! Advent now. Christmas carols and decorations later!

But it's the gospel every first Sunday of Advent that really shakes us. A rather odd way to begin the new church year. The end of the world and the second coming of Christ. Haven't we been here before? It's like an exchange between Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Giles, her watcher. Buffy asks, "How many apocalypses is this now?" Giles says, "About six, I think." Buffy responds: "Feels like a hundred."

Weren't our readings in November about the end? Here we are again. Gloom and doom. Destruction and despair. Things falling apart. The world falling apart.

Sometimes Jesus is described as an apocalyptic preacher. He talks as if the end of the world is imminent. There will be cosmic signs. Pay attention to the sun, the moon and the stars. There will distress and fear and foreboding about what is coming upon the world.

For the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

Jesus' earliest followers likely expected that he would return in their lifetime. But time keeps marching on. And so do the predictions of Doomsday and blockbuster apocalyptic movies.

The announcement that the Mayan calendar will come to a close in 2012 has shaken some people up. It forms the basis for the movie *2012*. Cosmic alignments cause the sun to go berserk and the earth's core to heat up. Los Angeles falls into the ocean. Yellowstone blows up, showering the continent with ash.

Astronomers may say it's all bunk. But plenty of people are so shaken, so worried about what could happen in 2012, that one astronomer receives 20 letters and e-mails a day from people scared out of their wits. One was from a woman wondering if she should kill herself, her daughter and her unborn baby.

But even if we can't relate to that hysteria, we know what it is to be shaken up. The problems of the world and the stress of life can be overwhelming. It seems we never reach equilibrium. There's always something to deal with. There's always something on our plate. Something in the news. Something that rearranges the pieces of our lives. There's always a concern about what the future holds.

Actually, it's the kind of thing that makes a good story: the unexpected twists and turns, the interruptions, challenges, struggles, even disasters. It's what we call plot—when things get shaken up and things are never the same again. We like it in a movie or novel, but when it happens to us, well, it is unnerving.

Al Gore was interviewed on WBEZ this past week. He said that most people have come to believe that there are climate change issues to deal; but a lot of people just don't see the *urgency* of it.

Maybe the apocalyptic language of Advent is there to get our attention. To shake us out of our complacency. To give us a sense of urgency.

We have been here before. And yet every Advent is a new beginning. We are different than we were a year ago. The world, different as well. The church year is less like a wheel that keeps going in circles, and more like a spiral.

And that brings us to the stir-ring. As the days grow colder and darker there are stirrings in us. As we face all the things that shake us up or even shake our faith, there are stirrings within us. As we deal with all the expectations and emotions of December, there are stirrings within us.

You'd think it was all about us and what shakes us, what stirs us. But in this place we learn another language. Each Sunday of Advent the Prayer of the Day begins with an ancient phrase addressed to God: *Stir up*. They're sometimes called "stir up" prayers. Stir up, your power, O Lord, and come, we pray.

It's hard for us to admit that we can't do it on our own. We come to the end of our rope ... or our hope. We get so shaken up that we can't keep things in perspective. Politics or religion or relationships or the problems of the world can get the best of us. And we realize that we can't save ourselves. And so we cry out to God: Stir up your power, to come and save us.

There's an old tradition that on "Stir up Sunday," as it used to be called, families would make a traditional plum pudding or fruitcake. Everybody—kids and all—would take their turn stirring in the ingredients: candies, fruits, lemon and orange peels, raisins and currants. The point is that it couldn't be eaten until Christmas. There is something about waiting and patience. About anticipation. About delayed gratification. About delicious complex flavors that only come with time.

Shake, then stir.

Whether the end of the world is coming tomorrow or at our death, we are shaken by a world filled with so much change and chance, so much terror and despair. Yet our hearts are stirred this Advent Sunday as we celebrate Christ's Second Coming. Here and now. Christ comes again in bread and wine. In song and silence. In children and seniors. In the poor and in loved ones. In a single candle burning on the Advent wreath.

It may not be a recipe. But it is my prayer for you, for me, for the church, for the world: that our prayers and hopes and longings get stirred up.