

**Centre Congregational Church, UCC
Brattleboro, Vermont
December 3, 2023**

**The Reverend Dr. Scott Couper
Transcribed by A.I. and ZOOM**

“Quaking Mountains...Awesome Deeds”¹

Scripture: Isaiah 64:1-9



Credit: "Tear Open the Heavens", Laura Wright Pittman

Please be comfortable. Let us pray:

*Loving God. We have heard your Word. May it seep into us this morning,
throughout the week, and throughout the season. Amen.*

¹ Title taken from “Sermon Seeds”, *Worship Ways*, United Church of Christ.

Welcome to the first Sunday of Advent. As Mark rightly mentioned, Advent is a season of waiting, of expecting. As the Cera Family reminded us, waiting and expecting begins with hope. You are hoping for that which you wait and expect.

Within the Christian tradition, during Advent there are two events for which we wait, we expect, during the Advent season. The first one is what is often referred to as the Second Coming when Jesus returns again to earth to complete, to finalize, that which He began almost 2,000 years ago: a reign of a peace, a reign of justice. Christians have been waiting for this Second Coming for a long time. Due to this long wait, the interpretation of the 'Second Coming' in the future is often perhaps better reinterpreted to be a 'Second Becoming', that is, a coming that is partially already here. Christ Jesus is in our midst, if we can observe Him. Christ Jesus is working today, now, and here in our own hearts and lives.

Traditionally, the first two weeks of Advent are usually focused on the 'Second Coming'. That is why we hear much lament in our scriptures these two weeks. The prophet saw, and so do we, so much pain, sorrow, and injustice. We cry out for God to intervene again – decisively and conclusively – to establish peace and justice. We lament for at least two weeks. Then during the third week of Joy, Gaudete Sunday, we pivot.

It is from Gaudete Sunday that we focus upon a second hope: the awaiting or the expectation of the First Coming of Jesus as an infant, as Emanuel, 'God With Us'. The waiting for the nativity allows us to do a typological re-enactment. We wait again for the birth of Jesus.

During Advent, there are two things for which we hope for in our readings. First, we hope for God's dramatic intervention in the world to establish peace and justice once and for all. As you heard in the scripture, the prophet Isaiah described quaking mountains and awesome deeds. The title of our service series for Advent is also dramatic: "Tear open the heavens!" The scripture quote is a lament that begs for and yearns for God's dramatic intervention. We wait for a rupture in the heavens that allows the mountains to quake with God's awesome deeds.

When I was about nineteen years old, I studied in Chile. I lived with a homestay family in Santiago. I remember during my first week in Santiago, I was climbing

the stairs at my homestay and, I promise you, I felt the staircase on which I stood, and the whole house, move. I saw everything quiver. I felt motion through my legs, and all the way through my body. The event was not terrifying. In fact, I almost wondered if I only had too much to drink at dinner. Nothing in the house fell; nothing broke. I could still easily keep my balance and stand. I asked my homestay family, "Is that what I thought it was?" My home stay family said, "Yes, that was an earthquake. They happen all the time." I was not scared. I was not terrified because the quake was a small one. Yet despite the quake's small size, I undeniably felt it. I perceived it, without question.

This past summer, when I went to El Salvador in August, I stayed in a hotel that was within spitting distance of a volcano. Now this volcano had once been an active for over one-hundred and eighty years, constantly spewing for its smoke and lava. The volcano was always active until, all of a sudden, on one night and the late 1960s it just stopped! No more continuous eruption after a hundred and eighty years of constant activity. Now I promise you, before I lay my head down that night to sleep, I was watching that volcano. I promise, I promise you, I could see just a little bit of smoke coming out of the caldera. Micah saw it too. We asked the staff about it. Yes, the staff verified that a small amount of fumes, smoke, gas, from vents, whatever, was coming out of that volcano. And I'm like, "Wait a minute, I was told this thing is not and has not been active at least since the late 1960s!" And the staff said, "Yes, it is inactive." But there was 'stuff' coming out of it! It was just a little bit. Like, maybe, like they hired ten guys to sit in there and just smoke all the time, you know, hidden behind the caldera's ridge. But no one was smoking and there was no smoke machine plugged in with a long extension cord. Apparently, there were some vents that allowed some activity to be visably. I said to Micah, my son, "You know, if something is coming out of that thing, it's active. I don't care what anybody says! It's active as long as anything is coming out!"

What I saw was not dramatic. I did not fear. Yet, I could see activity.

This Advent, I am hopeful. I am expectant. I am hopeful not necessarily for that which is dramatic like the Second Coming when the heavens will be torn open and the mountains will quake. Perhaps that will happen. It's not for me to say one way or the other. Yet, I am hopeful and I expect that peace and justice will increasingly

be established in this world in which we experience so much about which to lament, about which to cry out.

This Advent season, our church is following an Advent devotional. I'd like to thank Priscilla for assisting us. We are reading *All I Really Want* by Quinn Caldwell (2014). The book is an Advent devotional that assists us to be open, to expect, and to wait. There are still some copies left. If you would like to buy one, please do. And after the worship service, we will discuss today's Sunday reading.

I would just like to share with you one paragraph that perhaps we'll talk about after this worship service. The devotional reads: "Since the earliest days, believers and scoffers have been asking. 'Well, why isn't Jesus back yet?' And they wondered whether it might be that he's not coming back. The author of Second Peter has an answer for them: 'He's not back yet, dear Humankind, not because He is slow or uninterested, or not coming at all. He's not coming back yet because He's giving *you* time to pull yourself together before he does. He is giving you time to practice seeing God in small ways. In that way, you'll recognize God when God arrives in big ways. God is revealing himself in slow, random-seeming increments, just little glimpses, here and there of the picture He's painting of the story whose end He is.

And then the devotion concludes: "It's your job to be patient, to pause, to look, and to be prepared for little bursts of delight."

What a beautiful perspective on Advent!

I'd like to ask all of you right now, very briefly: When do you see glimpses?' When do you see instances of God's reign? When do you see God's realm breaking through? I'll give you just a moment to ponder.

This week, I had a text conversation with a friend of our church and a colleague of my name, Isaac Evans-Frantz. We were lamenting the recent shootings in Burlington. We were lamenting the breaking of the ceasefire, the cessation of the hostages being released, and the resumption of the war in Gaza. I wrote to Isaac, "It's all so depressing." And Isaac wrote to me, "Where do you find Christ in the midst of it all? I'm listening to music."

I wrote back to Isaac, "Such a great question." To his question, "Where do you find Christ in the midst of it all?" I responded, "In people like you who strive for peace and justice. And in Daniel Sicken", another friend of our church who protests the use of nuclear weapons." And I said, "In William Pearson who protests the destruction of our climate." And finally, I said, "I find Christ within many in my church."

Yes, we wait for the dramatic, be it the first coming or the second.

But I think, most importantly, we should wait for those events, those small earthquakes, those small little eruptions, that don't necessarily turn the world upside down. Yet, we unmistakably feel them and know what they are. These are that which fuel hope. We should be able to see and notice even just these little teeny, tiny puffs of smoke coming out of volcanoes' calderas.

And when we see them, when we see the realm of God breaking through in our world, we need to recognize them. We need to name them. We need to celebrate them. We need to do whatever it is we can to enable them to break forth even further into our world.

So, friends, this Advent season, take special notice of the glimpses, the small breakthroughs of love, peace, and justice. Do whatever you can to tear it open some more, with God.

This is the Word of God, and it was preached to all of you, the people of God and the people of God responded, "Amen!"