

Ready?

Welcome to the season of Advent!

It's the time when our Gospel guide turns from Luke to Matthew as a new church year begins.

And Advent is the season when, more than any other church season, we shall spend time ruminating about, endings.

Our individual endings.

Our collective endings.

Scott Janssen, a hospice social worker, tells this story:

"For months, I've visited 92 year old Evan and for months, he's been praying to die.

He has colon cancer, and he's tired.

His life is tedious, even meaningless, with nothing to look forward to except its end.

He often talks about committing suicide.

But today, he's a changed man!

He's happy and upbeat — and this sudden change makes me wonder.

Is he going to do it?

Is he planning a way out?

"You seem different today," I say casually.

"What's happening?"

He looks at me cryptically.

"Do you believe in ghosts?" he asks.

It's not the first time a patient has asked me this.

People have unusual experiences as they near the end of life.

Out-of-body experiences.

Visits from spiritual beings.

Messages in dreams.

"There's all kinds of ghosts," I respond seriously.

"What kind are you talking about?"

"You remember me telling you about the war?" he asks.

How could I forget?

He traces his lifelong depression to his time as a supply officer for a World War II combat hospital.

The war convinced him that nothing good could ever come from human beings.

Those terrible years left him feeling afraid and alone.

"I remember."

"There's something I left out," he says, as he begins to describe this one horrific, ice-cold, autumn day.

Casualties are flooding in.

He and others scramble to transport blood-soaked men on stretchers from rail cars to triage.

In triage, those with a chance are separated from those who won't make it.

"I'm hustling all day.

By the time the last train arrives, my back is broken, my hands are numb."

He swallows hard.

"What happens when the last train gets there?" I ask.

"We're hauling this guy, and my grip on his stretcher slips."

Tears start rolling down his face.

"He hits the ground, his intestines are oozing out from his open belly.

And then, he dies."

"Later that night, I'm on my cot, crying over this whole rotten mess.

My cot's creaking because I'm shaking so hard.

I'm going crazy with the pain."

"Then, I look up and there's this guy – sitting on the end of my cot.

He's wearing a World War I uniform, helmet and all, but here's the thing,
he's covered in light, like he's glowing in the dark."

"What's he doing?," I ask.

Evan starts crying – and then laughing at the same time.

"He's looking at me – with an intense love.

I can feel it.

I've never felt that kind of love before."

"What did it feel like?"

"I can't put it into words."

"I guess – I just felt like I was actually worth something.

Like all the pain and cruelty – isn't what's real."

"What is real?" I ask.

Evan replies, "knowing that no matter how screwed-up and cruel the world looks, on some level, somehow, we're all loved, we're all connected."

"Years later, I was cleaning out Mom's stuff after she died, and I find this old photograph.

It's the glowing guy from my bed!

On the back, mom's handwriting says: 'Uncle Calvin, killed during World War I.'"

We talk some more, then I ask, "But, what's this have to do with your better mood?"

Evan whispers, staring out the window, "He's back."

"Saw him last night at the foot of my bed.

But now, he's talking!"

"What'd he say?"

"He says he's here with me.

He's going to help me over the hill when the time comes to go." S. Janssen, *Pulse – Voices From the Heart of Medicine*, modified.

Fred Buechner tells of a friend who dies in his sleep, unexpectedly.

Not long after, that friend pays Fred a long and heart-warming visit, in a dream.

And in the dream, the friend is wearing a blue knit sweater.

The next morning when Fred wakes up, there, on the floor by his bed, is a thread, a thread of blue knit.

Did it come from the sweater his friend was wearing?

Why tell you these stories on a Sunday morning when the gospel lesson is all about the end of the world?

Perhaps because whether its the end of THE world, that Jesus is telling us about this morning, or the end of OUR world, when we shall each of us close our eyes for the last time, none of us knows when that day will come.

You don't have to look far to be reminded of the uncertainty of life.

Just last week, four college students in Idaho were out getting snacks late at night, and several hours later, all were dead, at the hands of an unknown person.

Also last week, students at UVA returning from a field trip found themselves at the other end of a gun, the shooter being a distraught fellow student.

Natural causes too can bring about the end of our world, without warning.

At the clergy conference last week we were remembering our friend, Fr Saimone Lino, who, after mass one Sunday went to Costco with the family.

He got out of his van and collapsed; he could not be revived.

The season of Advent is the season to slow down and remember that we are mortal.

And in that remembering, to pause and perhaps reassess how we are living our lives.

It's a time to ask: "Am I ready for the end?"

"Ready" meaning: am I "doing the deeds of mercy, forgiveness and peace that characterize kingdom people?" NIB, V8, p 448.

Too many Christians think of the "end times" as a reason to exploit the earth, and each other, because, after all, the end is coming!

Others see the "end times" as a reason to walk away from family and society.

But what Jesus is urging his disciples to see is that "the end" is NOT about walking away from our obligations toward each other and the planet.

It's about encouraging us to DO the gospel.

One day at a time.

As best as we can.

And how do we DO the gospel?

Matthew tells us when he describes what the last judgment looks like.

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne.

Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates sheep from the goats.

And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left.

Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me..." Mt 25:31f.

In the stories that began this homily, there is a sense of the kindness that awaits all of us in the next life.

That love and connection are the essence of that which is fundamentally real — as real as a piece of blue knit thread.

Isn't that what Jesus is getting at when he's describing what God's judgment looks like?

He's explaining to us that we are called, as creatures made in God's image and likeness, to also be kind and connected — especially to the least, the lost and the left behind.

And if we can nurture kindness and connection, if we can trust that kindness and connection are the cornerstone of reality, then, whether we live or die, we will come to know that peace, and that joy, which passes all understanding.

+amen

