Happy New Year! We bought you a judgment present!

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, and thus the start of the liturgical year. So, Happy New Year!

When we think of Advent, we of course think of getting ready for Christmas. And so we would expect our reading from the gospel to be one of the Christmas stories.

But instead, we have this scary sermon by Jesus.

I’ve said this before — in the old days, when liturgical calendars were more the order of the day, before the Anabaptist movement even began, perhaps, the four Sundays of Advent celebrated not the looking forward to the birth of the sweet little Jesus child, but: Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell.

So, there’s that. A belief that the best way to prepare our hearts for Christmas was to meditate on the four things that come at last, and will last: Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell.

Perhaps we’ve made progress by turning Christmas into a warm and cozy holiday for a cold season, a chance to rev up our economy and spend time trying to create a perfect family scene. I don’t know about you, I’ve never been that successful at creating that perfect Christmas morning; it’s usually more fraught with emotional dangers than Christmas cheer.

So, perhaps thinking on Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell might be … easier than creating the perfect Hallmark morning?

So, let’s look at this last things sermon by Jesus. It’s actually the second half of a sermon, prompted by Jesus’s disciples asking him about when his prediction that the temple would be destroyed would take place.

Jesus’s answer is complicated, and requires a better theologian or preacher than I to untangle all of its nuances. But there are some things that are very clear, and let’s focus on two of them.

First is this: “heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.” In saying this, Jesus declares that some things are temporary, even if they seem long lasting; and other things are eternal, even if they seem short lasting. We look at the majestic earth, and the beautiful sky that surrounds the earth, and they seem eternal. But they won’t last as long as truth, in particular the truth that Jesus brings. He spoke words, as you and I do, and the went out on the air waves and faded. But they were recorded in the minds and actions of his disciples, and were written down; But more than that, they revealed the truly eternal truths about us, about God, about our meaning and destiny.

The second thing is this: Jesus calls us to “Be on guard” and to “be alert at all times.”

He warns us to be on guard so that our “hearts on not weighted down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life.” Jesus first means this very literally — he doesn’t want us getting falling down drunk, and he doesn’t want us to be overcome with worry — it’s interesting that he thinks to pair them. Jesus knows that, besides being bad things in and of themselves, they weaken us, making us less able to stand up to the trials and tribulations of this life.

Bess used an expression recently. She said she didn’t want to “borrow trouble.” And this has been a good reminder to me. Why take on a debt of problems and pay them back with interest, when we don’t have to?

He warns us to be alert at all times. Hard things are coming, Jesus says, and we need energy and strength to survive them. He’s talking about a particular kind of hard thing, probably — the upcoming destruction of the city of Jerusalem that would take place in their lifetimes. And I am reminded a bit of what it’s like to be a city under siege in the recent exchange of air attacks between the Palestinian areas and the city of Jerusalem and even Tel Aviv.

There’s that kind of trouble, but we all have our troubles: our pains, our broken relationships and lost jobs; our serious illnesses and the people who have died whom we miss so much; betrayals and disappointment with how things have turned out; the sad state of the world.

And Jesus wants us to be strong enough to endure.

He calls us to pray that God will grant us strength.

He calls us to be alert. Do you know how every once in a while you’ll see a phrase in some familiar book or movie you never noticed before? There’s one here for me, in verse 28. Jesus tells us to “stand up and raise our heads.” We tend to get bent down by the troubles that surround us. And we try to shield our eyes. We get cowed. Perhaps if we can’t see it, or if we protect ourselves, we can avoid it.

But Jesus says to stand up and look it right in the face, because our “redemption is drawing near.” He wants us to be able to “stand before the Son of Man,” that is, himself, and be able to receive our redemption with the full attention it deserves.

So, be alert at all times. Pay attention to your life and what is going on around you. Let me ask, what things are you avoiding that you should be paying more attention to? What things can you give up to pay attention to them?