In South Dakota, there’s a vast stretch of plains that scientists tell us used to be an inland ocean. If there were human beings 70 million years ago, someone could’ve sat on the shore feeling like this ocean was quite permanent. Now, scientists can only point to the evidence that there used to be an ocean there. On the western side of South Dakota are the Bad Lands. They say the Bad Lands used to be a mountain range that eroded. We can look at Mount Rainier or Mount Baker as if they’re quite permanent. They’re not! Mt. St. Helens can attest to that. As the scriptures say, the mountains will be made low and scientists can point to where that has happened. If you’re not impressed by that, scientists also tell us that in a billion years, the sun will have expanded to the point where the earth’s atmosphere will have burned away. The point: there will come a day when everything that humanity has built on this planet will be destroyed forever. What a Debbie Downer!

During the season of Advent, the Church asks that we take some time before Christmas to stay put and reflect on the darkness in the world around us and why we keep vigil for Christ our light and why the birth of Jesus matters. We can’t save ourselves. Jesus is our only hope in this world and the next. Scripture asks us to reflect on the finitude and futility of the world in which we live so to invite us to look higher, to look beyond what is created and look to the Creator who alone is eternal. Rather than seeing our lives as an exercise in existential futility, we live our lives as a people of Advent, a people who keep vigil, who look forward to the Lord’s return in glory. Only the love of God can give us perspective on the decisions we make and draw us beyond the fading of this world to what the Book of Revelation calls a new heaven and a new earth. As the world gets darker, the Gospel offers us a light to shine our way. This good news has an impact on how we view our world so to be better stewards of everything that has been entrusted to us. In moments when we are fearful about the future, St. Paul gives advice: “…discern what is of value so that you may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ…”

There’s something wise about stepping back and asking, what really has value in this life? St. John the Baptist has a perspective here. It’s the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod was the tetrarch of Galilee, Philip was tetrarch of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas. These people were “who’s who” in Jesus’ day. If you wanted to be powerful you would want to be friends with these people. Who does God send His revelation to? None of them! Not to Caesar, not to Herod, not to someone living in a mansion, not to someone wealthy or famous, God sends His revelation to John the Baptist who wore camel hair and ate locusts. Great leaders come and go. Kingdoms through the centuries have risen and fallen. John the Baptist is the one to whom the Word of God comes. Why? John didn’t value possessions. John valued his relationship with God above everything else and so should we. At the end of our lives, it will not matter if we lived in mansions or tents, it will not matter what accomplishments we achieved or how expensive our car was. It will not matter how many gifts we had under the Christmas tree. At the end of time this all will turn to dust. At the end of our lives, what will matter? Did we live our lives in right relationship with God and the people around us? Were we faithful disciples of Jesus? Since we only have so much time, are we filling our lives with what matters most or are we settling for lesser treasure? We’ve lit the second candle. We’re keeping vigil for the Messiah. We live for Heaven by preparing, here and now, for what matters most in Eternity.