

12.2.18

While We Wait for Jesus

Luke 21.25-36

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In the weeks leading up to Christmas many of our schedules are filled with special events - getting together with friends, decorating, baking, music, and worship are often part of getting ready for Christmas. In the midst of the activities of the season and the worries and stress that can be a part of it, we can forget, often for chunks of time, that so much of what is going on is supposed to be related to the birth of Jesus and Christmas. Advent, which is a version of the Latin word meaning "*coming*," is a season observed in many Christian churches as a time of expectant waiting and preparation for the celebration of the birth of Jesus as well as remembering that he will come again.

The Second Coming of Christ is a theme in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke which all feature teaching by Jesus on the subject. Roman Catholic, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational churches that follow a set pattern of scriptures for each Sunday of the year, all include a gospel lesson on the return of Christ on the first Sunday of Advent. These passages don't direct our attention toward the joys of Christmas. There's no talk of a baby, a young mother, angelic choirs, or shepherds. Silent Night is absent from the scene. Instead, the first Sunday of Advent slaps us with the uncertainty and violence of human history — signs of dread, floods, earthquakes, and "distress among nations" that cause people to "faint with fear." Those awaiting Luke's lovely story of Jesus' birth have to wait until Christmas Eve. What Jesus says about his return sounds much more ominous. Listen to what Jesus says in Luke 21:25-36.

"There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and **on the earth distress among nations** confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. 26 **People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world**, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. 27 **Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory.** 28 Now when these things begin to take place, **stand up** and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

29 Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; 30 as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. 31 So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. 32 Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. 33 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. 34 **“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, 35 like a trap.** For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. 36 **Be alert at all times, praying** that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and **to stand** before the Son of Man.”

Interest in Jesus’ return can be seen in the many web sites, blogs, and books which discuss it, including more than a few that try to predict when Christ will return. There are always folks who are wrong about it in every generation. At the other end of the spectrum, are those who find talk about cosmic signs in the sun, moon, and stars and the powers of the heavens being shaken as strange. The first coming of Jesus was a quiet event in a small town observed by very few people. The Bible says the second coming of Christ will be seen by the whole world. Regarding the second coming of Christ, Diana Butler Bass observed, “What words better describe our world than those of Luke? *“People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world.”* These are not words of some far-off moment in time. They are words of NOW: Our cities and churches are full of people who are afraid — afraid of loss of their jobs, of income, of health care, of decency, of safety, of change, of pluralism, of ... of ... of ... The list of fears is nearly endless. **Yet — be honest — has there ever really been a time in human history when we’ve not been filled with such fears?** Luke’s words are also the words of all our yesterdays. We may imagine that the past was better, safer, cleaner, or more stable, but that is not the case. We are a fragile lot, we humans, and **our history is roiled with fear — and the stupid things that we humans do when we are afraid. And sadly enough, they are probably the words of many of humanity’s tomorrows.”**

Jesus says, *“When you see these things, do not cower in fear, for your transformation is drawing near.”* Advent teaches us that in the darkest times of human oppression, the pain of hunger, the violence of war, the heartache of grief, and political distress that God is still among us. We don’t want to be caught off-guard by the fear-filled tides of history. Jesus warned, *“Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”* (Luke 21:36)

I don’t spend time trying to discern when or if Christ is going to return soon. Jesus said to his disciples in Mark 13:32, *“But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”* In Acts 1:7 Jesus says to his followers, *“It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority.”* I try not to worry about things over which I have no control. This includes the return of Christ. God will determine when it happens in God’s time. It seems a wiser use of our limited years on earth to follow Christ as faithfully as possible; to do what Jesus says to do and to avoid what Jesus says to avoid. In this passage from Luke, Jesus is advocating that we do several things. **Be alert and pray so you are prepared to stand.**

We’ve seen in recent weeks the video and photographs of the smoke generated by the fires in California and how it darkened the skies. May 19, 1780 was also a day when an abnormal darkening of the day sky was observed over New England and parts of Canada. Speculation exists that this was due to a combination of smoke from forest fires and a thick fog. The darkness was so complete that candles were required from noon until midnight, when it finally dispersed and the stars could be seen. Some of the representatives in the Connecticut House of Representatives, glancing out the windows, feared that the end was at hand. Quelling a clamor for immediate adjournment, Colonel Abraham Davenport, the Speaker of the Connecticut House, rose and said, ***“The Day of Judgment is either approaching or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for adjournment. If it is, I choose to be found doing my duty. Therefore, I wish that candles be brought.”***

That is the kind of attitude Jesus is encouraging us all to have. Christ urges us not to faint from fear or foreboding now, when Christ returns, or anytime in between regardless

of what may be going on in the world or in our life. We are to be faithful in the duties to which he calls us. It's better to light a candle than to curse the darkness. Christ is not advocating a passive stance toward life where we throw our hands up in hopelessness and despair lamenting that there's nothing we can do nor that we passively absolve ourselves of responsibility to act by saying, "*All we can do is trust God.*" No, we're to be about our duty as Christ followers – bringing light rather than cursing the darkness as long as God gives us life and strength.

This is a time of year when some people watch a lot of football. Like in football, Jesus coaches us to engage in defensive and offensive activities. Defensively, Jesus says we're to be on our guard so that our hearts are not weighed down with "*dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life.*" I'm not sure most of us use the word "dissipation" regularly in conversation anymore. Dissipation is "*the nausea that follows too much drinking or wasteful living. It can also refer to dissolution, disintegration, or to lose irrecoverably.*" Jesus says we're to avoid, we're to be on the defense against dissipation, drunkenness, and the worries of this life. In football terms, we can't let them run right over us and pound us into the ground. Or if we have, we need to ask Jesus to take us on his team and coach us how to live better and defend ourselves against these things. Jesus loves taking on a challenge and he will work with us. I read this week that life expectancy in the United States has declined for three consecutive years for the first time since 1916 to 1918 when World War was being fought and the terrible influenza outbreak killed an estimated 50 million people worldwide in 1918. The reason for the decline now has to do with two major factors that are indicators of a loss of hope, meaning, and belonging and those issues are suicide and the opioid epidemic. There were more than 47,000 suicides in America in 2017 – the highest rate in at least 50 years. Massachusetts was one of 25 states that saw suicides increase by more than 30% from 1999 to 2016. Massachusetts also has one of the highest rates of overdose deaths in the country. Suicides and drug overdoses are driving a decline in life expectancy in the USA. Most people are surprised to learn that average life expectancy in the United States in 1918 was just 39 years old. Now it is more than double that for both men and women and yet many people are feeling hopeless, lonely, isolated, worried and fearful. Jesus refers to the worries of this life and for each of us they may

be different. You know what they are for you. Jesus doesn't want us weighed down by worry because worry doesn't help anything but it hurts everything. God wants us to live wisely and well. Ephesians 5:15-18 says, *"Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, 16 making the most of the time, because the days are evil. 17 So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. 18 Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit."*

Jesus and Paul both warn us to play good defense so our hearts don't get weighed down by worldly distractions. In Driver's Ed they teach students that distraction can be deadly. There are all kinds of warnings about accidents caused by distracted drivers who while driving are also talking, texting, eating, drinking, putting on makeup, fiddling with music, shaving, under the influence of alcohol or drugs, or even flossing their teeth. Just as it isn't good to be a distracted driver, we don't want to be distracted followers of Jesus either.

We want to defend against distractions, dissipation, and things that might cause us to be caught unaware by the coming of Christ. Someone may be thinking, *"This has nothing to do with me. I'm not concerned about this second coming stuff. I don't think it will happen in my lifetime."* Whatever one's view on the time of the return of Christ and the judgment of God, we all must face the inescapable fact that every life comes to an end. Being on our guard and keeping the end of life in view lends significance and urgency to each new day. One person noted, *"Always remember the end of your life and then you will never sin."* **Defensively Jesus tells us to be our guard.**

Offensively, Jesus tells us to be alert at all times, praying that we may have the strength to persevere and stand. In his book *Why Prayers are Unanswered*, John Lavendar shares a story about pastor and author Norman Vincent Peale. When Peale was a boy, he found a big, black cigar, slipped into an alley, and lit it up. It didn't taste good, but it made him feel grown up...until he saw his father coming. Quickly he put the cigar behind his back and tried to act casual. Desperate to divert his father's attention, Norman pointed to a billboard advertising a circus. *"Can I go, dad? Please, let's go when it comes to town."* His father's reply taught Norman a lesson he never forgot.

“Son” he answered quietly but firmly, “never make a petition while at the same time trying to hide a smoldering disobedience.”

We heard earlier from 1 Thessalonians 3:12-13 that says we’re to keep the faith so that we may be blameless before our God at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. Perhaps Jesus is saying that our praying will be more effective and fruitful if our hands are no longer holding onto disobedience. If our heart is lifted up with faith and expectation rather than weighed down with worries, bad habits or vices.

Offensively, as Christians we’re to be praying, living honorably with love and faithfulness while we wait for Jesus’ return. We seek to Love God, Love People and Be a Force for Good. That’s being on the offense for God rather than just sitting back waiting for God to do something or passively giving in to resignation. One of the things that can be annoying watching football is when your team is ahead and they start playing a *“prevent defense.”* The team stops doing what got it the lead and often it allows the other team to get back in the game. As disciples of Christ we’re not to sit back in a “prevent defense.” We’re to stay on the offensive. This is what Jesus is telling us to do –to keep exerting ourselves until the final whistle blows. Until we die or the Lord returns there is hope for us that we can repent and change and experience new life. There are opportunities for us to pursue and work for us to do to help God’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Jesus wants us to go all out for him as long as we have breath and strength. At Christmas we tend to focus on Jesus as a meek and mild child. When he returns, he will be far different. He will be coming in power and glory and on that day we want to be able to stand and hold our head high. This Advent, remember Be Alert. Pray. Stand. And do not be afraid.

Prayer: Light of the World, we come to You in this season of Advent, a season of darkness as we wait for the Light to return. In the midst of the busy-ness of the season, of the Christmas preparations and celebrations, call us to pause. Call us to look around, and to see You at work in our troubled world. Guide us to find new ways of living into Your love and grace, to loving all our neighbors as ourselves, to actively watch and wait for You to come into our lives in a new way. Help us to live as You desire us to live, with

Your love in our hearts for all people. In the name of Jesus, who is the Light of the World, we pray. Amen.

Blessing

Archbishop Tutu offered this blessing: (from *The Book of Joy*, page 298)

“Dear Child of God, you are loved with a love that nothing can shake, a love that loved you long before you were created, a love that will be there long after everything has disappeared. You are precious, with a preciousness that is totally quite immeasurable. And God wants you to be like God. Filled with life and goodness and laughter—and joy.

“God, who is forever pouring out God’s whole being from all eternity, wants you to flourish. God wants you to be filled with joy and excitement and ever longing to be able to find what is so beautiful in God’s creation: the compassion of so many, the caring, the sharing. And God says, Please, my child, help me. Help me to spread love and laughter and joy and compassion. And you know what, my child? As you do this—hey, presto—you discover joy. Joy, which you had not sought, comes as the gift, as almost the reward for this non-self-regarding caring for others.”

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

What might be significant about how Jesus says the Son of Man will come (Luke 21:27)? Hint - you may want to look up Daniel 7:13-14.

How would you describe the lesson of the fig tree (Luke 21:29-31)?

Do you think the promises in Luke 21:32-33 were a comfort to the disciples in the face of what Jesus was telling them about the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans as well as the second coming? Do you find them comforting; why or why not?

In response to so much heavy news in Luke 21, how does Jesus exhort his disciples to live in Luke 21:34-35? Why?

How well does your life reflect Luke 21:36? What will you do this week to become better at watching, praying, and living as a healthy, loving disciple?

Prayer of Confession

Ancient and Holy One, Creator of the Universe, we come to You impatient and demanding. We want more and more, we want safety and security, we want comfort and ease. We want to get our own way. Forgive us for wanting things instead of desiring Your way. Forgive us for putting our own comforts above the needs of others. Forgive us for being short-sighted and focusing only on the temporary, instead of looking to the eternal. Call us away from the ways of the world to seek Your ways of love, justice and peace. Call us to love our neighbor as ourselves, and to watch and wait for Your coming in a new way into our world and into our lives. In the name of Jesus the Christ, who calls to live differently, we pray. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon (from Jeremiah 29:11)

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. God is weaving the story of the world and our part is still being woven in. There is hope. There is newness of life. There is forgiveness and mercy and healing. Watch and wait for God, who is doing something new and seek to be a part of it. Amen.

May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. 13 And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. 1 Thessalonians 3:12-13