

Second Sunday in Advent: Luke 21:25–36

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Preached for the First Sunday in Advent, Year C

Happy New Year! No, I haven't slipped a month. Nor did you slip into a turkey induced coma and sleep right through the so-called "holiday season." Today is the Feast of St. Andrew, the brother of Peter, one of the fishermen-disciples of Jesus. And falling on a Sunday, it's also the first Sunday in Advent, and the start of a new church year. So, happy new year! We'll just let the world catch up with us.

Of all the seasons of the church year, I think I like Advent the best. I loved it as a kid, growing up with those advent calendars and the 25 little windows that counted down to Christmas. (We have one for every child on the way out of church this morning.)

I love the sounds of Advent, hymns look both backward and forward. Back to Christ's first appearing in humility as the Child of the Virgin. And forward to His coming in glory on the Last Day when every knee will bow and every tongue in heaven, on earth, and under the earth will confess "Jesus Christ is Lord" to the glory of God the Father. They are somber, plaintive cries – "Oh, come, oh, come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel. That mourns in lonely exile here, until the Son of God appear. Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel will come to you, O Israel." "Savior of the nations, come!" "Hark, a thrilling voice is sounding. Christ is near, we hear it say. Cast away the works of darkness, all you children of the day."

I love the sights of Advent. The purple of royalty. "The King shall come when morning dawns." The advent wreath, an eternal circle of evergreens branches. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He is the eternal God and yet for our sakes became mortal man and died so that in Him we might be ever green with His eternal life. The four candles, counting down the Sundays, reminding us that even though the days are getting shorter and darker, Jesus Christ is the Light of the world, the Light no darkness can overcome.

I love the images of Advent – the prophetic Word stand on the bring, ready to be fulfilled. Human history literally pregnant with the Promise of God. An angel whispers in the ear of a young virgin girl. John the Baptizer appears out of nowhere in the wilderness, preaching and

baptizing, preparing a people. Messiah is near! Get ready to meet him! Repent and be baptized!

I must confess that there are times when I'm driven to despair, just about ready to give up on Advent. The competition from shopping malls and Santa Claus and those sleigh bells jing-jing-jinglin' seems too much for Advent to bear. The culture has pushed the Christmas season – excuse me “holiday season” back to Halloween. It seems so irrelevant, so out of touch to watch and wait while everyone is running around from one thing to the next. Why not just dispense with the old Advent wreath and set up a tree like everyone else and sing Christmas songs the month of December? Why bother with fasting when there's all this feasting going on anyway? Maybe we should do as we do with our national holidays and reschedule Advent for January when we can give it its proper attention.

But then I think, no. This is perfect. This is exactly as it should be. It's kind of a picture of the way Jesus said it will be in the end times. When the whole world least expects it, when everyone is busy planning their next social engagement and doing business and having a grand old party, wham! the end comes like a thief in the night.

And so maybe it's good and right for us to do this counter-cultural thing, to watch and pray for the coming of Jesus while the rest of the world watches for bargains and prays for the lines to be short and traffic to be light. Maybe it's good for us to set aside some of this “holiday cheer” and light a purple candle in the darkness and chant those ancient prayers to Immanuel, begging Him to come and redeem His people. Maybe it's good for us, who are so accustomed to getting everything now, without waiting, to practice a little “delayed gratification,” and hold off just a little bit, because we know that there is a greater reason for this season than boosting the year end sales figures. Maybe it's good for us to let our faith interfere with our lives, attenuate our activity, shape our expectations.

God in the flesh has come to save us! The eternal Son of God came down from heaven, from the right hand of God, and took on human flesh and blood, and in humility obeyed His own Law perfectly and died to save the world. This same Jesus Christ, bodily risen from the dead and reigning in ascended glory will appear again, no longer covered in humility, but shining with a brightness that will make the sun look like a 40 watt bulb. He comes to judge the living and the dead. He comes to raise the dead to life and to change the living in an instant. He comes to judge the world by His cross, to give all who trust in Him eternal life and to condemn all who refuse His salvation.

Every eye shall now behold Him
Robed in glorious majesty
Those who set at nought and sold Him
Pierced and nailed Him to the tree,
Deeply wailing, deeply wailing,
Shall their true Messiah see!

We, as the church, have work to do – to prepare the world for Jesus’ coming. That’s why God has a church in the world, to prepare the way for the Lord, to keep a watchful eye out for the day of His coming. To keep soberly alert while the rest of the world dozes in a drunken stupor. To keep vigil, in these darkening days of the world’s winter. To watch and pray.

Jesus said to His disciples, “Be careful. Take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be heavy, weighed down by dissipation (the word means that sort of hungover heaviness that comes with excessive eating and drinking – perhaps you’re familiar with the sensation?), with drunkenness, with the cares and concerns of this life. Jesus seems to have our “holiday season” in mind, doesn’t He? Dissipation, drunkenness, anxiety. Sounds like December to me. Jesus knows His disciples, how easily they are distracted, how quickly they will go back to the old way of life. He knows us that way too. He knows that our spirit may be willing, but our old flesh is terribly weak. He knows that we begin with the best of intentions, but like a little leaguer’s swing, our follow through isn’t very good. Jesus knows all that.

Still, Jesus warns us. “Be careful, lest your hearts be heavy.” Heavy not just with cholesterol and heartburn. That’s the least of it. Heavy with the anxieties of life that press us down on every side. Jobs in a slow economy. A roof over our heads. Food for our tables. Keeping the kids out of trouble. And then all the little pressing things we take on. We don’t know quite how they got started, but each one claims just a little bit more of our time, our strength, our attention until it seems there isn’t any more left. Our calendars are full, our lives our full, our days are full. Our hearts become heavy as rocks.

It’s our idolatry. Our idols are killing us, consuming us bit by bit. Luther called the human heart a great “idol factory.” Unbuckled from the fear, love, and trust in God above all things, the heart will latch on to just about anything. It’s like the hooked part of velcro separated from the fuzzy part. It will stick to almost anything. That’s our heart, beating with the lusts and

desires of Adam, the ambition to be gods, to control the universe, (or at least those around me). To live for pleasure, for thrills, for excitement, for whatever will make us happy.

And the irony is that it all weighs down our hearts with cares the human heart wasn't meant to bear. Jesus would have us light hearted, not filled with anxiety and worry, not bloated and drunk, not clogged with cares and concerns. Free and happy hearted people – alert, ready, awake, watchful. That's the posture of Advent, and that's the posture for living in the last days. You know not the day or the hour. And when the big Day comes, it will spring like trap, so be ready.

On of the most misleading books ever to be published has been those "Left Behind" books. They're a kind of biblical fiction that supposedly deals with the end times. Unfortunately, they represent a scheme that's totally at odds with the Scriptures. The fancy name for it is pretribulational dispensationalism – the teaching is that true believers will be "raptured," sucked up out of this world, and the rest of humanity is going to schlep around for three and half miserable years under the terror of the antichrist.

Now what I appreciate about these books is that they try to flesh out how this is all supposed to happen. One thing I never realized before is that those who are "left behind" get a second chance to accept Christ before it's forever too late. It's kind of like missing the express bus but still catching the local bus when it comes to pick you up later.

Having said that, there are three big errors in these books. The first is that salvation is a kind of deal that you strike with God. God did everything He could do to save you by sending Jesus to die for you, and now you close the deal by accepting Jesus. Doesn't work that way. God doesn't deal. Second, that unbelievers get a second chance after the true believers get sucked off the earth. No such deal. Third, that the Last Day is preceded by signs that make it predictable. No, thieves in the night don't call ahead.

That's not how Jesus says it's going to happen. And since He's the One who going to appear, you ought to take Him at His Word. He says that the Day will come suddenly upon all who live on the face of the earth. All as in everyone. No rapture, no special entrance for privileged believers. Just one big instantaneous cosmic end, with bright shining Jesus appearing like lightning from horizon to horizon. And there will be less warning for that Day, then we in California get for an earthquake.

Maybe that's the best end times analogy to think about. Earthquakes. Unlike tornados, hurricanes, floods, and fires, earthquakes come with no warning and we still have no way to predict them. All you can do is be ready for whenever the day of the big one will come. (And you know how well those campaigns have worked. I used to carry an emergency kit in my car. Now I don't even have a flashlight that works!)

There is no preparation for the Last Day of the world. There is only being ready, watching for it, praying that you will escape all that will happen, and that in the end, you will stand before the Son of Man. Hear the Word of Jesus Christ addressing you: your sins are forgiven, let your hearts rejoice. Eat and drink Christ's body and blood. The gifts of His all-atoning death, He gives for your food and drink, not to weigh down your hearts, but to lift them up. You are baptized into the death of Jesus. You belong to Him, and He will strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father, when He comes with all His holy ones.

What a day that will be! Get ready!

Come, Lord Jesus!

Amen

SOURCE

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Hacienda Heights, CA (htlcms.org), "Luke 21:25-36 (1 Advent C)", posted 2003-11-30 (<https://htlcms.org/2003/11/luke-2125-36-1-advent-c/>).