

The Kingdom of God Is Near
Luke 21:25-36
First Sunday of Advent, Year C December 1, 2024
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Happy New Year, friends! Okay, it's not January 1st, which will kick off 2025, or your birthday, which will start the next year of your life, but the first Sunday of Advent is the beginning of a new church year. Our main Gospel for the upcoming year is Luke. And Advent, the first season of the church year, is a time when we await both the coming of a baby and the coming again of the King of kings and Lord of lords. The four weeks of Advent actually go in reverse time. This week, we'll be looking at Jesus' teachings about his Second Coming, which will occur at an unspecified time in the future. On the Second and Third Sundays of Advent we'll encounter John the Baptizer as he calls people to prepare for God's salvation. And finally, on the Fourth Week, we see the newly-pregnant Mary visiting with her kinswoman Elisabeth, who is about six months pregnant with John.

Advent is a time of patient waiting and mystery as we anticipate the arrival of the promised one. This is my favorite season of the church year. Despite all the hubbub in stores that are trying to get us to shop early and shop often, Advent is a time for quiet reflection as we consider what it means that God has taken on flesh and come to live with us as Jesus. He came to teach us, and ultimately to die a horrific death and be resurrected by God the Father so that we too might have eternal life. One thing I've learned over the years is not to rush this season. Yes, I was often ridiculously busy, though I've learned to let go of that flurry of activity and try to finish whatever I need to do before Advent actually begins. This is a time to savor the moment, to dig deeply into the word of God so as to contemplate what Jesus has done on our behalf, and to discern how we are to respond to God's great gift to the world and to us as individuals. Christmas will come, and on the 29th we'll have a service of lessons and carols so that we can retell the entire story and sing beloved carols of the season. But for the next four weeks, let's just be in the moment and ponder the life-changing meaning of Jesus' coming.

As we turn to Luke 21:25-36, Jesus is speaking to us shortly before his arrest and suffering. And, at least at first glance, what he has to say can be petrifying. Friends, there is no "baby Jesus meek and mild" as the curtain opens on the season of Advent. Today's reading is set against the backdrop of Jesus' teaching in the Temple concerning the destruction of all

of Jerusalem, including the Temple itself (Luke 21:5-24). When that time comes, catastrophic destruction will abound on earth and in heaven. Where, you may ask, is the good news here? We'll get to that as we unpack what Jesus has to say. But rest assured that all will be well, no matter how things look as we begin this reading.

We notice in verses 25 and 26 how signs will wreak havoc and create fear about what is going to happen. The Day of the Lord is coming! Terrifying yes, but when this occurs, people will see the Son of Man descend from a cloud "with power and great glory" (21:27). Let's remember that "Son of Man" is used in Luke and other places in the New Testament to refer to Jesus, particularly as it relates to his suffering, but the image is much older. Look at Daniel 7:13, where the phrase "one like a human being" can also be translated "Son of Man," just as Jesus says in Luke 21:27. Notice that this one in Daniel is "coming with the clouds of heaven":

As I watched in the night visions,
I saw one like a human being
with the clouds of heaven

This cloud image also shows up in Acts, a sequel to the Gospel of Luke written by the same author. In chapter 1, verse 9, the disciples stand as Jesus was "lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight." Two angelic beings reassure the disciples that Jesus "will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven" (1:11). So, when Jesus ascended forty days after his resurrection, he disappeared into a cloud; and when he returns, he will also come in a cloud.

How do you feel when you imagine all the signs that will precede his return, and then envision Jesus coming in a cloud? Would you run toward him...or run away? I'm honestly not sure, but I know I'd be overwhelmed. Jesus tells us in Luke 21:28 exactly what we need to do: stand confidently, knowing that his appearance guarantees that our redemption is near. Now that is great news! We need not be fearful. Jesus' coming will outshine a Steven Spielberg production for special effects, but we have nothing to fear! Our Savior is drawing near to us!

Jesus followed this very stark pronouncement with a short, easy-to-understand parable. He called his listeners to look at a fig tree—or any tree—for new leaves. The budding branches clearly indicate that summer is just around the corner. Likewise, when we see signs on earth and in heaven we know that the kingdom of God is drawing near.

Jesus goes on to say "this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place" (21:32). Seems we've hit a bit of a snag here. The generation of the mid-first century has long-since passed away. But if

“generation” does not refer to an age cohort living in a specific time, what might it mean? Renowned preacher and scholar Fred Craddock writes:

The word [generation] can refer to a period of approximately thirty years or to a period of an indefinite number of years but characterized by a particular quality such as suffering or waiting or witnessing” (*Interpretation: Luke*, page 247).

Dr. Craddock’s second definition hits the nail on the head! Jesus describes the period of time that he is referring to as being characterized by suffering, waiting, and witnessing! So, Jesus is not giving us a specific timetable, but instead is locating this earth-shaking event

between the time of God’s punishing of Jerusalem and God’s judgment of all nations in the coming of the Son of man whose arrival will mean the redemption of the faithful (Craddock, page 248).

Understood as Dr. Craddock explains it, we are living in that very time! Jesus goes on in verse 33 to reassure his audience that “[his] words will not pass away.” But we can’t just lollygag around or live as if our behavior had no consequences. We need to be intentional about living for God. As such, we have to “be on guard” so as not to live in ways that are displeasing to Jesus. This final event will come unexpectedly like a trap springing on everyone...those who are prepared and those who are not. So what do we need to do? Jesus tells us to “be alert at all times” and pray for strength to escape. Then we will stand before the Son of Man (21:34-36).

Well, you say, this all sounds good, Nan, but I need to do so much more than keep watch and pray. We are, you know, less than one month away from Christmas Day. And there is shopping to do, presents to wrap, cookies to bake, a tree to buy, decorations to put up, and cards to mail. As a matter of fact, even though Jesus warns against them, I really am “weighed down with...the worries of this life” (21:34). This year has dragged on. We care bombarded with pictures of bombs exploding and people, including children and civilian adults, being killed or injured in the Middle East, Ukraine, and Russia. We’ve just come through a fractious election and the country seems more divided than it ever has in my lifetime. Compromise has become a four-letter word. And I think we can all imagine some heated discussions around the dinner table concerning our past, present, and future as a nation. We’ve been dealing with drought conditions here. Fires, which are so rampant in the West, have popped up in unexpected places in the East, including Manhattan. Although our country is not experiencing famine, as some other parts of the world are, many families in the United States are food insecure, which means that they don’t have enough food to

make it to the end of the month. Frankly, even without the cosmic signs Jesus teaches us about, it's easy to understand why many of us feel that life is spinning out of control. In his poem, "The Second Coming," William Butler Yeats captures the apocalyptic spirit of Jesus' teachings about the Second Coming, as well as our own experiences. I'm going to quote a portion, but you can find this poem online. It was written in 1919 as a response to war and turmoil. Yeats was deeply concerned with "social ills of modernity, the rupture of traditional family and societal structures; the loss of collective religious faith, and with it, the collective sense of purpose; the feeling that old rules no longer apply and there's nothing to replace them (<https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2015/04/07/no-slouch/>.) Perhaps you share Yeats' concerns, as I do.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
Surely some revelation is at hand;...
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: a waste of desert sand;
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

One helpful lesson that I have learned in preparing for Christmas during this season of Advent is to scale back expectations and work. We used to set up seven trees of varying sizes. Now, one or two will do nicely, thank you. Everyone room in the house no longer needs to be decorated. I also learned that gift bags are just as well received as boxes that I have to spend hours wrapping, even though that is fun. And it's been a long, long time since we've had a family large enough to have fifteen places set at the Christmas dinner table, so I no longer cook a huge meal. There was a time when I baked hundreds of cookies. And when Craig played in a brass group, we'd generally go to three services at different churches on

Christmas Eve, arriving home about 1:30, falling into bed so as to get up very early and get dinner underway for our company. Perhaps you have similar memories of Advents and Christmases past. For me, some of these changes have come about because people have died and I've grown older. But some of these changes I started making years ago when I recognized that Advent had become a whirlwind and by the time Christmas Day ended, I was totally exhausted. I feel certain that is not the way God would want us to get ready and celebrate. I'd encourage you to scale back and to finish your "must do's" as early in the season as possible.

You can then set aside more time to spiritually prepare yourself during Advent and throughout the Twelve Days that follow Christmas. Here are some concrete ideas:

Devote additional time to reading your Bible.

Read an Advent devotional book.

Add an ornament each day to a Jesse Tree.

Keep a journal in which you share your own spiritual discoveries.

Listen to some music of the season, such as Handel's *Messiah*.

Spend time with a child. You may be able to open the windows of an

Advent calendar together each day. Tell the Christmas story.

Perhaps you could both help someone or visit one who is lonely.

Bake treats for someone who cannot do that.

Whatever you do, ask yourself how what you are doing is contributing to your spiritual growth and how it enables you to witness to someone else about the God who sent Jesus to live among us out of love for the entire world. I pray you will find, as I have, that focusing attention on Jesus will enable you to find peace and blessings during this most wondrous time of the year! The kingdom of God is drawing near! It's time to get ready!

Love, Nan