

Advent: What Are We Waiting For?
Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-36
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First Presbyterian Church of Spruce Pine
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Jeremiah 33:14-16

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness."

Luke 21:25-36

"There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing Near."

Jesus told them this parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees. When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near.

"Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

"Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you suddenly like a trap. For it will come on all those who live on the face of the whole earth. Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

In a recent article in the Presbyterian Outlook ([1st Sunday of Advent — Nov. 28, 2021](#)), pastor Andrew Taylor-Troutman recalls a classic scene in the movie "Talladega Nights." In the movie actor Will Ferrell plays a NASCAR driver named Ricky Bobby. Before sharing a meal with family and friends, Ricky Bobby clasps his hands, bows his head, and begins his prayer like this, "Dear 8-pound, 6-ounce newborn infant Jesus." When his wife questions his prayer, Ricky Bobby replies, "Well, I like the Christmas Jesus best." Taylor-Troutman goes on to say this:

The prayer is meant to be funny, with over-the-top descriptions like "tiny Jesus in your golden fleece diapers," but I think there's a note of truth in it, too. Many worshippers do come to church on the First Sunday in Advent, liking the Christmas Jesus best.

I think a lot of us, including myself, like the baby Jesus best. And in many ways we may see these weeks leading up to Christmas, the celebration of the birth of the baby Jesus, as a time simply to prepare for his birth - to get the decorations and gifts ready as we prepare for Christmas.

But on this first Sunday of Advent we do not meet the baby Jesus, but rather the adult one - not the one wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in the manger, but the one who is a prophet talking about signs to watch out for when he will come again in glory and majesty in the clouds. In many ways it is much easier to talk about the 8-pound, 6-ounce baby Jesus. But talking about the end times, and the return of the Son of Man in the clouds - this may make us feel uncomfortable. Maybe we should let other churches speculate about the timing of the rapture and the cataclysmic things associated with the end times - we can just stick to singing, "Away in the Manger!" But here's the deal - the season of Advent invites us to do much more than prepare for the baby Jesus, to have sentimental thoughts and memories about that Holy Night.

Advent comes from the Latin root word that means arrival or coming. During these weeks leading up to Christmas, we do look back in history, remembering the mystery of God becoming flesh in Jesus. During Advent we also look forward to the future, the coming of Christ's return in majesty to judge all things and to fulfil God's promise to redeem all of creation. And in Advent we also pay attention to the present time as we discern God's mysterious and surprising presence that comes to us now.

In today's reading from Luke 21 Jesus is having a discussion about the future advent, the time he will return again to earth. This topic was very much on the minds of Christians during the decades immediately following Jesus' death, and many believed Jesus' return was imminent. When the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans around 70 AD, many believed that this was a sign of the end times. Along with this destruction came increased persecution of the early church, and so Christians hoped that Jesus would return soon to bring justice and judgement to the world. This desire to read the signs of the time, the political events unfolding around us as indications of when Christ will return, this has continued throughout the history of the church. What exactly did Jesus mean when he said, "I assure you that this generation won't pass away until everything has happened" (21.32)? As we know, many generations have passed since Jesus made this prediction, the Son of Man has not yet returned in the clouds, and so this can be a problem for some who cannot live with mystery. And some people over the years have become motivated to try and solve this problem with their own predictions. In the 1970's Hal Lindsey's book [The Late Great Planet Earth](#) became the best-selling nonfiction book of the decade, predicting that Christ would return sometime in the 1980's, since that would be a generation from the time Israel was reconstituted as a nation in 1948. The more recent [Left Behind](#) series of books and movies tapped into that same theme, focusing more on the fate of those left behind when the rapture comes - some people find safety and are rescued by Jesus, while many others are left to face the consequences of trials and tribulations.

But instead of getting caught up in books and movies that try to explain things or even exploit people's fears about the unknown, it's usually best to ground ourselves in the scriptures, to look at what the text actually says. Today's passage from Luke is part of a larger discussion in chapter 21. When Jesus predicts that the temple will one day be destroyed, his followers are naturally curious. So they ask him, "Teacher, when will these things happen? What sign will show that these things are

about to happen?” (21.8) And then Jesus says, “Watch out that you aren’t deceived. Many will come in my name, saying, ‘I’m the one!’ and ‘It’s time!’ Don’t follow them. When you hear of wars and rebellions, don’t be alarmed. These things must happen first, but the end won’t happen immediately.” In this passage and others throughout the gospels, one thing is abundantly clear - no one knows the time when Jesus will return! In Matthew 24, Jesus puts it like this: “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven...” only God knows. And so it's certainly not helpful for people like Hal Lindsey and others to speculate about the end time. Yet, it’s tempting to do so because Jesus does talk about the signs to come before his return. “Nations and kingdoms will fight against each other. There will be great earthquakes and wide-scale food shortages and epidemics. There will also be terrifying sights and great signs in the sky.” And in today’s passage we get more specifics about the cosmic signs. Jesus says, “There will be signs in the sun, moon, and stars. On the earth, there will be dismay among nations in their confusion over the roaring of the sea and surging waves. The planets and other heavenly bodies will be shaken...” (21.25-26).

Any of us who have been paying attention to the current climate crisis knows about the dangers of heat waves, devastating fires, surging oceans and rising waters. Over the weekend I learned about flood waters are even endangering the Smithsonian National Museum of American History, waters seeping in through the basement. Even if we don’t fall into the Hal Lindsey camp, there are distressing signs that with warming waters and rising sea levels, continuing conflict among the nations, the global pandemic we are still facing - all of this gives us ample evidence to be concerned, to be afraid. In today’s passage Jesus tells us that the signs to come would cause people “to faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world” (21.26). I think we know something about the fear that Jesus is talking about - it's something we are witnessing today all around us and even within us.

But while it can be easy to fall into the trap of fear, worrying if now is the time when the world is finally falling apart, today’s passage points us in a different direction. Instead of getting caught up in the question of timing, of whether the signs we see are signs of our coming destruction, Jesus says our focus really should be somewhere else. “When these things begin to happen - conflict among nations, confusion over the roaring of the sea and surging waves, the planets and other heavenly bodies shaken, causing people to faint from fear...” Jesus says something remarkable! He says, ***“When these things begin to happen, stand up straight and raise your heads, because your redemption is near.”*** (21.28)

Be confident and stand up straight, God’s desire to redeem the world is coming near. Don’t put your head down in fear or dismay, instead raise your heads and look up - God’s promise to redeem and restore the creation is close at hand. Just look at the fig tree and all of the trees, says Jesus. “When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near.... when you see these things happening, you know that God’s kingdom is near” (21.29-31).

Bible scholar and preacher David Lose has some helpful things to say about how we are to understand the time in which we live ([Advent 1C: Stand Up and Raise Your Heads! November 23, 2015](#)). As Christians “we live and work, love and struggle between the two great poles of God’s intervention in the world: [first] the coming of Christ in the flesh in order to triumph over death through the cross and resurrection... and [second] the coming of Christ in glory at the end of time and his triumph over all the powers of earth and heaven.” So we live in this “in-between time”

between the poles. We can look back on God's coming to us in Jesus as a baby, and also look forward to the time he will come again - but we are living now in the present, in-between the manger and the second coming. And the question before us is "How are we going to live in these times? Are we going to be controlled by our fears, heads down and in dismay, or are we going to live lives characterized by hope and courage because in the words of David Lose, "we know that the end of this story, while not yet here, has been written by the resurrected Christ."

If we really trust that the end of the story is written by the resurrected Jesus, the one whose love is so strong that it will never let us go, the one who promises to redeem not only us but all of creation - if our trust really is in this one, then that is a game-changer for how we live each day.

- Instead of numbing out through excess consumption of food and drink and other stuff, we instead are called to stay awake - to stay alert (21.34-36).
- Instead of getting trapped by the anxieties of day to day living, we are instead to look up and pray.

While our culture tells us we should have it all now, Advent invites us to practice an active type of waiting, staying awake to what's important, staying open to little miracles all around, trusting that God's kingdom is close at hand.

My friends, during these weeks leading up to the celebration of Christmas, I have a challenge for you. I believe if we are going to have a chance to make this Advent more of a spiritual experience in our day to day lives, we are going to have to try some advent practices. So I invite you to consider two things: One is to find at least ten minutes a day for a devotion, a simple Bible reading and prayer - ten minutes to be still, not distracted by all the things vying for our attention. Perhaps you can use the advent devotional from Henri Nouwen or another resource. Find time each day to slow down, to pray, to look up and claim the promise that our redemption is at hand.

The second daily practice I invite you to consider is reaching out to someone in your circle with a simple act of kindness. It may be making a call to a friend you have lost touch with - it could be sending a text or a card to someone who may be struggling - it could be sharing a smile with a stranger at the grocery store, or donating time or dollars at a helping agency. While the first practice is an opportunity to look inward, this one is a chance to look outward and share love and kindness with someone else. I believe when we do these simple things each day, we have a better chance of experiencing the good news of Advent, the good news that the One who has come to us a baby, the One who promises to come again some day, this same One continues to show up in surprising ways right here, right now.

To God be the glory, now and always. Amen.