

Luke 21:25 “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.”

Luke 21:29 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.

Luke 21:34 “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day 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.”

LIFE INTERRUPTED

Many years ago President John F. Kennedy was asked to write an article for the World Book Encyclopedia about how a young person who aspired to be the commander in chief should prepare for the job.

Kennedy spent the first part of that article saying in effect that there was no way to prepare for the job. World events and crises would often cause the President to confront problems that he had never even considered.

Certainly this was true of the Kennedy administration and every Presidency since his time. Their plans were almost always interrupted by events that were beyond their control. I thought Kennedy’s comments were particularly poignant since not only his administration but also his life was interrupted in an unexpected way.

Often this is true for us as well. Our well established routines and plans for the future are interrupted by great events that are beyond our control. We had our retirement all planned, and then the stock market crashed. We are feeling secure and then we lose our job, or our spouse tells us that she wants a divorce or a loved one dies.

Almost everyone has a personal example of what I’m talking about this morning. The only constant in the world is change.

And yet we manage to delude ourselves into thinking that tomorrow will be just like today. And when the unwelcome surprise comes into our life we find that we have very few resources to deal with the problem. We aren't ready. We are not prepared to deal with the big interruption in our life.

PREPARING FOR ADVENT

This is the first Sunday in Advent, and Advent is all about interruptions and getting ready. We are getting ready to celebrate the first coming of God in His Son, Jesus. We are preparing to celebrate the glory of the incarnation. We are preparing to think about what it means that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

But, and this often gets lost, we are also getting ready for the second coming of Jesus. The first time God came to us he came as a baby in a manger. The Bible tells us that the second time he comes it will be on a cloud of glory. (Luke 21:27)

There will be (literally) earth shaking events. There will be "signs" in the sun, the moon and the stars. People will be scared to death because the normally reliable rhythms of nature will be interrupted in violent ways. (Luke 21:25-26)

This image of the last days has been a source of fascination and fear down through the ages. People have predicted that the end of the world would come "soon" from the very beginning.

Even Jesus seems to suggest in this passage that the end of days would come before the present generation of disciples had passed away. (Luke 21:32)

THE PROBLEM

Of course, that presents a problem. We know that this didn't happen.

There are two ways to explain this.

First, we could say that Jesus just made a mistake. After all Jesus had chosen to be limited by becoming a human being (Philippians 2:5-11), and in Mark's gospel Jesus says that no one knows the hour of the second coming, even the Son of God. (Mark 13:32)

But, in this particular passage Jesus seems to be adamant about his prediction. He says that "heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away." (Luke 13:33) If that's true then it seems to me that a second interpretation of this passage might be more helpful.

Perhaps Jesus does not mean that the world will literally end before that "first generation" of disciples passes away. Perhaps Jesus is using this highly symbolic, apocalyptic language to talk

about the fact that God has already interrupted the ways of the world by becoming a part of his creation.

The glory of God in Christ has already been seen, first by the shepherds and then by the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration. There have already been signs in the heavens, the star at his birth, for example. And when Jesus dies on the cross the sun will refuse to shine. How do people respond to these glimpses of glory? Disciples and critics alike are afraid. Why are they afraid? Heaven came down, and it was too much for men and women to bear.

The Word of God who created the world has now become flesh, and that means there will be no more business as usual, not in Jesus' generation or in the generations to come. When Jesus came that first time, it was the beginning of the end of the world as we know it. There was a power let loose in the world that cannot be controlled or predicted.

There was a Divine Interruption in the affairs of men and women that changed everything.

LOOK UP INSTEAD OF ABOUT

The question is this: will we see the glory of God in Christ in our day or will we be controlled by our fear? Notice in this passage that not everyone sees the glory. Some are overwhelmed with fear by the great and terrible events that are happening.

But, Jesus tells his disciples, "When this happens don't look around at all the problems. Don't focus on the fact that the world is falling apart. Look up and see the salvation of God, the Son of Man coming in the clouds."

To put it another way, "Look up instead of about."

This is the function of apocalyptic literature. It is a way of getting us to look up instead of about. When everything that you have ever known and all that you love is threatened where can you find help? You can only find help by trusting in the promises of God. You can only find salvation in the one who made the heavens and the earth.

This is what the Psalmist said so eloquently,

- 1 I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?
- 2 My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.

(Psalm 121:1-2)

Jesus' discourse about the end of everything is set in the context of a comment that his disciples made about the temple. They said in effect, "Look at this beautiful temple with all of its shining stones. I feel closer to God when I'm in the temple."

And Jesus said, "Don't put your trust in anything made by human beings ... even the temple. One day soon this very temple will be completely destroyed." (Luke 21:5-6)

Now God's people should have understood this. Their temple had already been destroyed once by the Babylonians, and God's people were taken into exile. Surely they of all peoples should have understood that nothing made by human beings lasts forever.

But, they didn't understand. They, like all of us, put their trust in the temporary instead of the permanent. They reversed the prescription of the Bible. They looked about instead of up.

We need to remember that nothing lasts forever. We say that someone died "unexpectedly."

But, that's not true. We are mortal. Death is expected.

And all the things that we think are permanent are in fact temporary. We know that even the world in which we live is temporary. One day our sun will burn out in a blaze of glory and everything will come to an end.

Now why does Jesus want us to consider these rather disturbing facts? Why does Jesus want us to think about the cataclysmic events of the last days ... whether it be our own last days or the last days of the earth itself?

He does it to wake us up to what is really important. He wants us to prepare for his coming.

He wants us to get ready.

How can we do that?

How can we get ready for something that will most surely come unexpectedly? (Luke 21:34-36)

In our passage for today Jesus suggests two things that we need to do in order to get ready for the coming kingdom.

LIGHTEN UP

First, we must not be weighed down with "dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life." That word translated "dissipation" means "drunken excess." It speaks of a careless indulgent lifestyle.

Peterson's translation captures the essence of this verse very well. In the Message he translates verse 34, "But, be on your guard. Don't let the sharp edge of your expectation get dulled by parties and drinking and shopping. Otherwise that Day is going to take you completely by surprise, spring on you suddenly like a trap ..."

One way to escape the problem presented by our own mortality is to just fill our life with stuff. We can drink too much. We can buy too much. We can eat too much. We can fill our lives with trivial pleasures.

All of us are guilty of this to some extent. All of us tend to do something compulsively. All of us are "weighed down" by some activity or habit that we use to take our mind off of some unpleasant reality. Jesus tells us that excess in any area is a sign of a spiritual problem.

Every year when I read this passage and others like it strikes me that we "celebrate" the birth of Christ in a way that is the absolute opposite of what Christ tells us to do. We have created a season of excess and worry to celebrate the birth of one who told us to live more simply and not worry!

I heard a guy on TV bemoaning the fact that many people will be cutting their Christmas list. He said, "If you've been receiving a gift from someone this year you might just get a batch of cookies instead of a real gift." And I thought, "That's not so bad. This recession may just force us to do what we need to do."

The first thing we can do to prepare for the coming of Christ is just lighten the load. We can all get rid of some things that are weighing us down. We can all monitor our lives and find those areas where we are prone to unhealthy excess.

PRAY

And the second thing we can do to prepare for the coming of Christ is to pray. Actually this passage tells us to pray for something specific. We are to pray that we will have the "strength to escape all these things that will take place and to stand before the Son of Man."

One commentator said that in apocalyptic literature (that is in passages like the one that we study today) "what is going on is mixed with what is really going on." In other words current history is set in the larger context of God's purpose for the world.

I think this might be a good definition of prayer. We refuse to accept the world as it is. Instead we think about the world that God in Christ is creating. Instead of looking about at the problems we look up at the promise.

This is how we can escape the despair and cynicism that is so much a part of the world in which we live.

Now please don't misunderstand. I'm not saying that we should become religious ostriches and bury our heads in the sands of denial. Christians know that sin is pervasive and powerful.

Sin controls the actions of nations and sin controls our actions as well. Things are really bad. It's not your imagination. And that's the feeling that this apocalyptic passage tries to convey. The world is messed up.

Peterson captures this very well when he translates verses 25 and 26, "It will seem like all hell has broken loose--sun, moon, stars, earth, sea, in an uproar and everyone all over the world in a panic, ..."

On our own we might well conclude that things are so bad that the best thing we can do is just eat drink and be merry because tomorrow we die.

But, when we pray, we put what is going on in the context of God's purpose and promises. When we pray we acknowledge that it is not all up to us. When we pray we look up instead of about.

We often speak of seeing things from a bird's eye view. I would suggest that prayer helps us see things from a God's eye view. Our gaze is lifted up.

Prayer does change things. It doesn't change things in the sense that we always get what we want. But, prayer does change our perspective. Prayer gives us the ability to look at the troubles of this world from a heavenly perspective.

Theologian Jürgen Moltmann wrote in a book about hope:

"I tried to present the Christian hope no longer as such an 'opium of the beyond' but rather as the divine power that makes us alive in this world."

Many people use faith as a kind of narcotic. It becomes a reason to do nothing because they think nothing is possible until the kingdom comes. They use passages like our passage for today as an excuse to long for tomorrow while neglecting the opportunities that are here today.

Just the opposite should be the case. The hope of God's future makes us alive in the world today. It gives us courage and hope when everyone else has given up.

CARRY THE LIGHT

A minister told of some missionaries who worked in Palestine.

Marthame and Elizabeth Sanders ministered to a small Christian population in the occupied West Bank. In the midst of mortar attacks, midnight raids by soldiers, and the innocent deaths of

people they love, these missionaries have tried to offer a God's-eye view of all this tragedy--a vision that offers healing and hope amidst all the hostility.

Now in the Middle East, Easter is celebrated in a particular way. On Holy Saturday--the day before the Orthodox Easter, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch enters the tomb of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. After a moment of prayer, he emerges with the holy fire, which he then passes on to the faithful.

From there, with shouts of "Christ is risen!" the flame is spread to the churches all over Israel and Palestine.

Unfortunately, because of the tight occupation gripping most of Palestine, this ritual proved to be almost impossible for the Palestinian Christians from the West Bank. They simply couldn't get through the Israeli military checkpoints.

So Marthame Sanders decided to make the impossible possible. He borrowed a car from the Catholics, some lanterns from the Orthodox Christians, a robe from an Anglican priest. And then he started out early on Holy Saturday morning to go and get the light.

Immediately, he was stopped and threatened at one of the checkpoints. But though he was verbally harassed, because he was an American, he was allowed to pass.

He rushed to Jerusalem, getting there in time to receive the holy fire from the Patriarch. Now the trick was to get the flame back home through all those checkpoints before the fire went out.

Late at night, he once again entered that tricky checkpoint, and this time he was stopped with an M-16 being waved nervously in his face. His baggage was searched. The gas tank, the trunk, and the steering wheel were taken apart.

But, finally he was let through. When he arrived back home, he was greeted by a large crowd, and so at midnight, this joyful throng of people traveled from church to church, bringing the light of Christ to the Orthodox, the Melkite, the Catholic, and the Anglican communities.

Marthame's reflections on that day are the very heart of this day's Gospel lesson--the good news that hope is always stronger than despair when life is seen from a God's-eye point of view.

He wrote,

"Everyone agreed that the arrival of the Holy Fire this year paled in comparison to the celebrations of brighter days, but it was the biggest event in years. The days are still dark here.

The economy is destroyed. The roads are closed. The army comes to town far too frequently.

But for a brief moment, the Christians in the northern West Bank were reconnected with the miracle of Christ--the miracle of incarnation, the miracle of hope."

GOOD NEWS FOR DISCOURAGED PEOPLE

Today's Scripture was written to people living with the kind of darkness and despair that haunts the villagers of the West Bank. It is also the kind of despair that haunts most of us in one way or another.

And so, to a people who have lost everything, Luke recalls the words of Jesus that say in effect, "Yes, bad things are going to happen. The world is in a mess. Earthquakes will happen. Tsunamis will happen. Terrorism will happen. But, the bad things won't have the last word. God will have the last word, and his word is brighter than any darkness."

Long ago God's Word kindled a light in the darkness, and a universe was created. When that Word became flesh God brought the light into the tomb and transformed it into the womb of new life.

This world has indeed experienced a Divine Interruption. And it's still going on. God is still in the business of transforming darkness into light.

And it is our job as the people of God to carry that light to others.

Today Christians around the world light the first candle in a four-week journey through the darkness of Advent. What does that candle mean?

It means that instead of becoming bogged down in an orgy of mindless celebration we are called to open our eyes to the one true light. Instead of turning a blind eye to the pain and darkness in our world we are challenged to carry the light of God's love and salvation to those who need it most.

There can be no more business as usual for any of us. Christ has come, and Christ is coming again. The Divine has interrupted our world, and things will never be the same. Praise God for that.

Amen.