

Luke 21:25-34

“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 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.”

## TAKING CHRIST OUT OF CHRISTMAS

This is the first Sunday in Advent, and Advent is all about getting ready. We are getting ready for Christmas. 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, down through the years we have been able to tame the message of the incarnation. We have learned to think warm thoughts about the sweet baby Jesus and never even consider what the grown up Jesus actually said and did.

We really have managed to take Christ out of Christmas.

We have made this ancient story a very small part of a larger holiday season, a season marked more by Black Friday and Cyber-Monday than the glory of

the angels.

Indeed the real Christmas story seems strangely out of place in this world.

I was shopping for a new electric plane at Home Depot this past week. The old one decided to bite the dust right when I needed it most. Why does it always happen that way?

Anyway, as I shopped they played Christmas carols over the loudspeaker.

Now the sound system at Home Depot is designed more for a message like, “Customer service on aisle nine.” It is not designed for music.

And when you crank up the volume on that sound system and play the songs of faith as we shop for tools and lumber, well, it’s just not right.

In fact, it was torture. It almost seemed sacrilegious. “Round yon virgin mother and child” does not fit in this world of screen doors and lighting fixtures.

But, I guess when you think about it the message of the angels hasn’t fit in this world from the very beginning. We have this season dedicated to greed

and the bottom line at a time when we celebrate the birth of one whose kingdom was marked by self-sacrifice.

No wonder some want to do away with the religious content of Christmas. The story doesn't really fit with how society celebrates.

And for many years I have complained about this. Every year I and countless other preachers have talked about putting Christ back in Christmas.

The Presbyterian Church has encouraged us to celebrate Christmas in a more modest way by asking the question, "Whose birthday is it anyway?"

But, you know, as I listened to those badly played Christmas carols in Home Depot it occurred to me that maybe it would be better to take Christ out of Christmas, at least Christmas as it is celebrated in the secular world. I don't want people to associate buying cordless drills with the story of Christmas!

## THE FIRST AND SECOND COMING

And that's where our lesson for today really helps us prepare for the coming of Jesus. In the church we begin Advent not by talking about that first coming

of Jesus but by talking about his second coming.

This Jesus does not come as a child born in a manger. This Jesus comes on a cloud of glory. This is the great and terrible Day of the Lord, the Day when a righteous God comes to judge and redeem creation.

On this Day there will be earth-shaking events. There will be “signs” in the sun, the moon and the stars. The sea will roar. The waves will pound the shore.

People will be scared to death because the reliable rhythms of nature will be interrupted in unexpected and violent ways.

This image of the Apocalypse has been a source of fascination and fear down through the ages. People have predicted that this Day would come “soon” from the very beginning.

Even Jesus seems to suggest in this passage that this great and terrible Day would come before his current present generation had passed away. And that presents something of a problem.

What did Jesus mean? How can this prediction be true? Apparently Jesus was adamant about this. He

said that “heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”

Jesus is saying that when he came, when the Word became flesh, when heaven came to earth, things changed forever. This was the beginning of God’s new creation.

You see the first coming of Jesus is linked with His second coming. They are two parts of the same Divine movement. And we, all of us are still part of the continuing story.

Think about it. The signs and wonders mentioned in this passage were all a part of the story of Jesus.

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 earth trembles and the sun will refuse to shine.

Here’s your signs.

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 nor 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.

## A NEW CREATION

In the Bible the Day of the Lord causes great fear for the people. They are unprepared and are overwhelmed by the great and terrible events that are happening.

And I can understand why people of every age thought that they were living in the Last Days. If these signs are supposed to be predictors of the end, we have seen these signs already. In every generation we have seen these signs.

Disasters both natural and man-made make us afraid. We are overwhelmed by talk of a fiscal cliff, dysfunctional and dangerous governments, wars and

rumors of wars.

Author Thomas Friedman has it right. Our world is getting “hot, flat and crowded.”

All is not well in our world. But, are these signs of the Apocalypse?

Absolutely, they are.

They are signs that the world is not what it is meant to be. The world is seriously out of whack. We need God to step in and make things right. We need a new world, a new creation.

And God has already started the process. God has made a down payment on that new creation.

God sent his Son into the world to redeem the world. The process of creating a new heaven and a new earth has already started. The birth pangs of a new creation have already begun.

Jesus says when we see these disturbing things, when we see these signs of the end, we don't just run around and bemoan the fact that the sky is falling. We remember that we are God's children and we turn our focus on the God who created heaven and earth.

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.

Stand up. Look up. See the salvation of God, the Son of Man coming in the clouds.”

To put it another way, “Look up instead of about. Your redemption is coming near.”

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. The Psalmist wrote, “I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth.”

## PREPARING FOR ETERNITY

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.”

Now God's people should have understood this.

The Babylonians had already destroyed their temple once, 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 looked about at the glory of the things men and women had done instead of looking up at the glory of God's creation.

Nothing lasts forever. 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 is 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  
and something over which we have no control?

## A SPIRITUAL DIET

Jesus tells us that we get ready by going on a diet!  
I'm not kidding. It's in there, verse 34.

He said that 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 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 member of our Bible study took great exception to that shopping reference. And I must admit that this probably is not an accurate translation of the original, but it does translate the spirit of the message. Excess comes in many forms.)

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.

Does any of this sound familiar?

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 our excess is a sign of a spiritual problem.

Pastor Rick Warren was on one of the morning talk shows this week. He has a very large church, and at one service he (and I assume) the other pastors baptized (by immersion, since he is a Southern Baptist) over 800 people!

Now Rick is a big guy, and many of the people he was baptizing were quite large as well. And baptizing all of these large people wore him out. Toward the end of that service it occurred to him that he and his large congregation had a weight problem.

The next Sunday Rick confessed before his congregation that he was too heavy. And he added that many members of his congregation were too heavy as well.

And so, he was going to put the whole congregation on a diet!

I had to wonder if the congregation got a bit smaller, at least in number, after that Sunday! Most of us don't want to hear such "heavy" comments at church.

But, addictions and excesses, no matter what form they take, are just a way of taking our minds off the big picture. It is our way of looking about instead of looking up. Instead of embracing the drastic change that comes with God's Kingdom, we try to escape.

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!

Rick Warren has it right. We do need to go on a diet. But, it's not just about eating too much.

All of us are weighed down by something. All of us have a heavy heart. And so we often try to compensate in some other way.

All of us have an area of excess in our life, a compulsive addiction that is fueled by our fears about the future. We need to lighten up.

And the way to lighten up is to look up. We lighten up by focusing upon the things of God instead of the things of this world. We lighten up by living on tiptoe, anticipating the glory of God coming to earth.

This is how we prepare for the coming of Christ. This is the message of Advent.

## PRAYER

And the tool that helps us do this is prayer. Jesus tells us 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 “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. It is through prayer 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 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,..."

In other words this is the Bible asking the question that you've probably asked in frustration at some point, "What's this world coming to?"

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.

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. Prayer changes our perspective. Prayer gives us the ability to look at the troubles of this world from a heavenly perspective.

Many people use faith as a kind of sedative. 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. A glimpse of God's future gives us courage and hope when everyone else has given up. Instead of being weighed down by the troubles of the world we are lifted up by the promise of God's tomorrow.

Wake up brothers and sisters. It's Advent. God is coming near.

And Christ is coming back to Christmas.

Amen.