

## **Preparations**

Welcome to this first Sunday of Advent! Advent is an interesting season in the life of the Church. It's the start of a new Church year, in which we live into the story of Jesus and the Church which emerges – of which we are all a part. There are only twenty-four days left until Christmas morning, for all of you who are keeping count! It's a hectic and busy time of year, isn't it?

We rush from Thanksgiving right to Christmas. Our society fixates on spending as much as we can, as quickly as we can, so that we have the very best gifts to give that we can. Much gets lost in the messiness and preparations for the upcoming holiday – so much, in fact, that we might be tempted to skip out on other responsibilities or roles to line up and get into Walmart or some other store right as they're opening. Back before COVID, the stores would do "early bird sales" on Thanksgiving night, and ads were passed around the dinner table to peruse while eating the Thanksgiving meal.

Making preparations is nothing new. As a kid, Thanksgivings were held at our house for the entire extended family. Mom would be up around 4:00 in the morning on Thanksgiving Day throwing a thawed turkey into the oven so it would be ready for lunch by noon. We shouldn't be surprised, since we see preparations which occur in our own lives, to think that God also made preparations thousands of years ago. Our first Scripture reading, from Jeremiah, speaks of the preparations the Lord made nearly a thousand years before the birth of Christ, for Jesus to come live among us. And our second passage this morning, from the Gospel of Luke, speaks of preparations for His imminent return. If you have your Bible or a Bible app handy, turn with me to Luke 21:25-36. **Read Luke 21:25-36.**

## **Christ Has Died, Christ Is Risen, Christ Will Come Again**

Two weeks ago, we heard Jesus talking about the destruction of the temple in Mark's Gospel. Many Bible scholars think that Mark was the first Gospel account written down, and then Luke and Matthew copied from him, and added additional details in their accounts from a now lost source commonly referred to as Q. What we have in Luke's Gospel this week is the follow up conversation Jesus had with His disciples on the Mount of Olives recorded in Mark 13, about the destruction of the temple, and signs of the end times. It seems out of sync that we would consider Christ's return on this first Sunday of Advent.

We'd rather kick off the Christmas season and focus our energies on preparing for the Babe in the manger. Yet our Gospel reading didn't say a peep about the birth of Christ. That's because Advent is a time when we not only focus on Jesus' coming as the Baby born in Bethlehem – His first coming, if you will – it's a time when we also focus on His second coming as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. To be sure, Methodists don't talk a lot about the second coming. It's too bad, because it's as much a part of the Gospel as Jesus' birth. We're reminded of this during the Sacrament of

Holy Communion when we recite the mystery of faith: “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.”

Faith in Jesus Christ is based on historic fact, is a present-day reality, and is our future hope. We celebrate His birth at Christmas, we testify to His presence in the form of the Holy Spirit, and we believe that He is and will be with God at the end of time to reign over the whole creation. So, on this first Sunday of Advent we hear what Jesus says about it straight from His mouth. He says, “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,” (Luke 21: 25-26).

### **Hardship and Hope**

Hardship and hope make strange bedfellows. Jesus warns us that things will look and feel worse and worse – that chaos will threaten to overwhelm and even shake the foundations of heaven. And it did. Matthew’s account of the death of Jesus records:

From noon until three in the afternoon darkness came over all the land...

And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, He gave up His spirit.

At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.

The earth shook, the rocks split and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life, (Matt. 27:45, 50-52).

The whole creation was thrown into chaos on Good Friday when Jesus died. Can you imagine how it must have been to have been there at that time? The sun disappeared from the sky, a massive earthquake, which shakes the foundations of the earth so hard that the graves burst open and dead people – they had been buried in tombs – come out and start walking around? And the temple – the pride of the nation – has the Holy of Holies desecrated in the moment because the veil was ripped from top to bottom revealing the earthly throne of God Almighty. It sounds like a horror film, or an Indiana Jones movie. But it really happened.

And of course, the people were terrified. They ran for their homes. I suspect they really thought on Good Friday that the world was coming to an end. Some of them, apprehensive about what was coming on the world, probably tried to numb themselves to the hardship they faced. Sometimes we still do that. It may seem like things won’t get any better and the hardships will cause us pain and suffering. We’ll be tempted – and some of us will give in – to despair.

### **Much Hardship**

“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,” (Luke 21:27-28), Jesus says next. The fact that He’s coming with power and glory doesn’t change the reality of hardship. When we consider Jesus, we also need to recognize that hardship was His constant companion. He warns us repeatedly in the Gospels that we will have hardships as we wait. The Advent story has a Merry Christmas ending, but if we’re telling the truth as faithful followers of Jesus, then we must also say that the ending is still being written.

This Advent, after hurricanes, floods, and fires, after another election cycle and another year of war in Ukraine, and a spreading conflict in the Middle East, there is much that seems worse than ever before. There is much hardship in the world. It seems as if everything that does not belong to the Kingdom of God is in open rebellion, trying to shake the gates of heaven by damaging the things – the people – which God loves here on earth. When it looks this way, Jesus says to “lift up our heads, because our redemption is drawing near.” The awfulness and hardship around us are not the only things to see.

“He 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,’” (verses 29-31). The idea of tremendous hardship is contrasted with looking at plant growth. New life is happening, because the season has turned. In this in-between time, when we feel both hardship and new life, Jesus tells us, “the Kingdom of God is near.” That’s hope! We will see the kingdom come, even if we die – we will not pass into nothingness before we see the goodness of God in the land of the living because this earth and this heaven will be renewed into the everlasting new heaven and new earth when Jesus Christ returns. That’s a great hope!

### **His Words Will Never Pass Away**

Jesus makes a statement next that is still applicable to us today. He says, “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,” (verses 32-33). His return may be tomorrow. But even if it takes Him another hundred years from now to return, some of these little kids we have here in our church family will still be living and will still see it happen. And if it takes Him another thousand years, it’ll be okay – because His word is true. His words will never pass away. What He says He’s going to do, He’s going to do, all in His right – and perfect – timing.

“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,” (verses 34-35). We have to guard our hearts so we aren’t led into despair. It’s interesting that He talks about “the anxieties of life.” Anxiety is a real thing. Since the public schools reopened post-COVID, I’ve heard more talk about anxiety from students – and from adults – than I ever did before.

“Be on guard,” Jesus says, “so your hearts aren’t weighed down.” We fall into despair when our hearts are weighed down. Back in 2003 they put JRR Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy on film. In those movies, we see the outcome of despair. Denethor, the Steward of Gondor feasts while his army collapses, and then thinking all hope is lost, lights himself on fire on his son’s funeral pyre, leaping to his death when he realizes too late, that his son, though injured, was still alive.

### **Look Up and Look Out for New Life**

Instead of despairing over our hardships – and attempting to numb ourselves to them through human tendencies – we must always look up and look out for new life. To

do so will give us hope. We must learn to live in the reality that the weather patterns, if you will, of this in-between time are carried on two very different, yet overlapping, jet streams. The winds of hope will lift us up when the winds of hardship knock us off our feet. We have to be willing to allow the Holy Spirit to make the internal preparations so that we may be ever better bearers of Christ's image in the world, to the world.

Jesus' closing remarks really resonate with me. "Be 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," (verse 36). The hardships we face are serious enough that getting through this life is going to feel like we escaped by the skin of our teeth. Our hardships may not be the same. Different people have different hardships. Take, for instance, our neighbors who we went to and prepared a meal for a month ago at Alpha Center. They were hungry. And while we may not think about it, hunger is something everyone experiences.

I find it interesting that throughout the Gospel accounts, much of Jesus' ministry occurs around a common table. He ate with prostitutes, thieves, and the sick. In a moment, we'll gather with Him again around His table as we celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion, and once again let Him feed us that spiritual food that nourishes our hearts, souls, and minds. Friends, our hope comes from being in the presence of our Redeemer – both on Judgment Day at His return, but also now through the Holy Spirit. Learning to look up and to look out for new life is to believe that we are already in His presence even when He is in the process of making preparations to come near. Over the next few weeks of Advent, we'll be reading the Scripture's teachings on how to grow the strength that we need for this in-between time.

This Advent, we'll join in the prayers of the saints who endured hardship even before Jesus started His public ministry. They did so because they had hope that the world's redemption was drawing near in the Person of Christ. We'll hear when John the Baptist calls us to the Jordan to be baptized and pray with Mary as she sings her song of praise to God for all the great things He has done and is doing. This Advent we'll be on "red alert," as the captains on *Star Trek* might say, when Satan tempts us to despair because things are not as we know they ought to be. And we'll pray to have eyes opened to see the new life that Jesus has begun here on earth as we hope despite all the hardships surrounding us.

**Prayer:** O God of all the prophets, You herald the coming of the Son of Man by wondrous signs in the heavens and on the earth. Guard our hearts from despair so that we, in the company of the faithful and by the power of Your Holy Spirit, may be found ready to raise our heads at the coming near of our redemption, the day of Jesus Christ. Amen.