

St. Timothy's Lutheran Church
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December 2, 2018
Luke 21:25 - 36

Watch and Pray

Welcome to the season of Advent. This is a season of rich darkness, a pregnant pause, awaiting the joy that is to come. Advent is a season of hope, a flickering light in the prolific night.

Advent is the first season of the church's liturgical calendar, and it begins at the End. The End of all things, when the Son of Man will return, and life as we know it will come to its dramatic conclusion. It then traverses again to the first Advent, the coming of God in the flesh as a baby, born to a young virgin girl named Mary. And so, we begin this Advent, like every other Advent, with the End, the End of all things, the end of life as we know it.

For many of us, it is not difficult to consider the End. We seem to be reminded of, and inundated with, it every day. We have experienced incredible loss and destruction of land, relationships, and lives. Just this year alone, our state has been terribly burned, devastating hurricanes and earthquakes have struck our country, we have experienced the loss of loved ones and of beloved Christian leaders like Billy Graham and Eugene Peterson, another large-scale abuse has been uncovered in the Catholic Church, relationships between men and women have become increasingly severed and irreconcilable, our social media and politics have become vile and uncompromising, terrorist attacks have continued around the world, families have been separated by divorce and politics, senseless mass

shootings, and the list goes on and on... And then, there are your own reasons you might add to this terrible list.

Perhaps it is because I am older than I once was, but I have never before heard so many people wishing the year to *end*. 2018 has been a *very* difficult year for many, and it is *impossible* to remain untouched by the pain around us. The news has been too much to bear and has settled into our collective unconscious. It is understandable to see people become untethered and fall into despair. Romans 8:22 is a perfect expression of this time: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time." Creation has been groaning; *we* are groaning, *longing* for hope. *We need* hope.

Jesus' audience needed to hear hope too – and they didn't even know it. Jesus was about to be betrayed and handed over to the authorities to be crucified. His disciples would run away in fear, and then would be persecuted. They had *no* idea what they were in for.

Open your Bibles, please, to Luke chapter 21. At the beginning of chapter 21, Jesus is teaching in the temple. (We find this out in chapter 20.) He is with his disciples in the Court of Women, and sees a woman depositing her last two coins into the temple treasury. After commending the woman to his disciples, his disciples then comment on their fascination with the temple stones and gifts dedicated to God, verse 5. Jesus then says, "As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down."

Jesus here is referring to the destruction of the temple, which would happen during the First Jewish-Roman War in 70 A.D. Of course, his disciples do not know

about this coming war, so they ask, verse 7, “When will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?” [Jesus replies] “Watch out that you are not deceived. For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and, ‘The time is near.’ Do not follow them. When you hear of wars and revolutions, do not be frightened. These things must happen first, but the end will not come right away” (Lk 21:8 – 9).

Jesus, in his genius, replies in a somewhat cryptic way to his disciples’ request. The disciples want to know when “not one stone [would] be left on another” (Lk 21:6), and what signs will indicate the beginning of its destruction. Jesus tells them to *watch out* that they are not deceived, to be aware of false messiahs, not to be frightened when they hear of wars and revolutions, and that this will *not* be the End. Jesus answers *neither* question. He does not tell them when the temple will be destroyed nor any signs, but to *watch out*, and that the end of the temple will not be the End.

Before *anything* takes place, however, Jesus tells them (verse 12) that they will be persecuted. They will be “brought before kings and governors” on account of Jesus, and “this will result in [their] being witnesses to [the kings and governors].” Their families will turn against them, and they will be hated. But, “by standing firm (verse 19), [they] will gain life.” They will be persecuted, the temple and Jerusalem will be destroyed, the people will flee, and then the End will come.

And here we begin our text for this morning, verse 25. “There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars.” What signs? He does not say. “On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. Men 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.”

At the End, there will be chaos above and chaos below. People will be terrified and faint. The Son of Man will come down with “power and great glory” (Lk 21:27b). And, Jesus’ disciples are to stand and lift up their heads, because their redemption, their rescue is near.

Jesus does not describe specific signs or a specific timeline, but a time of chaos and fear. Jesus’ disciples are *not* to faint; they are to *stand up* and *lift up their heads*, because their rescue is near.

Among Christians, there are a variety of views of the End, largely based on the book of Revelation. There are the pre-millennialists and post-millennialists, who have particular timetables as to when they believe Jesus will come. And then, there are the a-millennialists, who do not believe there is a known timetable. Lutherans have historically been a-millennialists, believing that the Second Advent of Jesus has an unknown timetable, and the book of Revelation is largely *not* meant to be read literally.

Jesus, in Luke 21, gives a list of signs, but gives no specifics, and provides an indication that the End will sneak upon us like a trap. Verse 34: “Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with excessive drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap.” In other words, do not be

like the people who will faint from terror or who are surprised at the chaos. *Stand up and lift up your heads, because your rescue is drawing near.*

Verse 36: “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.” This verse requires some language work. The Greek word used here for “watch” is not the typical word used for “watch.” This word can be translated, “be alert” or “watch over.”¹ The word for time is the word some of you know from your Huddle groups, *kairos*. *Kairos* is “viewed as an occasion rather an extent” of time, and is often associated with God’s “appointed or proper time.”² These first five words can be translated, “Be alert on every occasion.” And then comes that word “pray.” The Greek word used here is *also* not the typical word used for “pray.” This word may be translated “beg” or “pray.”³ Let’s read verse 36 with this new translation: Be alert on every occasion, and pray, *beg* 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.

Jesus here does not give his disciples, or future disciples, knowable signs of the End. If that were the case, it would not come upon us like a trap. And he warns his disciples to be alert on every occasion, *not* to watch for signs, to beg God that we might escape the terrors, and to stand before the Son of Man.

But if we are *not* watching for signs, for *what* are we watching, for *what* are we alert? We are alert for all that threatens our allegiance and our hope. *We are alert for all that threatens our allegiance and our hope.* Our allegiance is not to this

¹ Barclay M. Newman, Jr. *A Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament*, 3.

² Newman Jr., 90.

³ Newman Jr., 40.

world, but to the God who *created* this world. Our hope is in His promise, His promise to be with us and to one day, make all things right. And we wait for God's presence, His incarnation to us in the midst of chaos and despair.

Advent is *not* the "this is fine" meme, a comic strip of 6 pictures of a dog sitting on a chair with flames surrounding him. He is sitting in front of a cup of coffee, and says with a smile on his face, "This is fine." He takes a sip of coffee as the flames come closer and says, "I'm okay with the events that are unfolding currently." The flames reach his arm and begin to melt him as he says, "That's okay, things are going to be okay." The next image you see is of the dog melting with a smile on his face.⁴ Advent is *not* the "this is fine" meme.

Advent is seeing clearly the chaos and despair around us, naming evil for what it is, and living in hope. Advent is lighting a candle in the darkness, aware of the chaos, evil and darkness around us, and *refusing* to succumb to it. Advent is *hope* in a season of despair. Advent is deciding to have children when you know that you won't always be able to protect them. Advent is getting up each morning when it seems like a struggle to live one more day. Advent is caring for your wife when she no longer remembers who you are. Advent is praying for your parents when they have deeply hurt or disappointed you. Advent is not being able to walk but deciding that God is not through with you yet, and so you call *others* with a word of encouragement. Advent is not feeling or knowing where God is at the moment, but continuing to seek Him anyway. Advent is lying on your deathbed and directing the family choir as they sing you one last hymn. Advent is allowing yourself to love again

⁴ <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/this-is-fine>

after losing your best friend. Advent is caravanning with a group of refugees to hear their story and to care for them, when you know you don't have influence to do more. Advent is distributing food to your neighbors, when you know you can't solve the global hunger crisis. Advent is caring for 15 homeless women when you can't solve homelessness. Or, as Martin Luther once said, "If I knew tomorrow that the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree!"⁵

Watch and pray, dear friends, and *live* in this season of Advent. Hope, for God is near, and your hope will one day become sight. Jesus *will* come once again, take hold of all of the powers of chaos and make all things right.⁶ O tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy. O tidings of comfort and joy! Amen.

⁵ <http://www.gurteen.com/gurteen/gurteen.nsf/id/L004462/>

⁶ Jim Nestingen, *CrossTalk*, 11/27/18.