

**December 2, 2018 Advent 1**

**University Lutheran Church of Hope, Minneapolis**

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**Luke 21:25-36**

28 Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

When we read the news about rapid global climate change, and tear gassed babies at borders, 85,000 children dead from preventable starvation in Yemen; when we read statistics about loneliness among young people, and sky rocketing mental illness, it certainly seems like the time may be nigh to stand up, and raise our heads, right? I certainly hope redemption is drawing near.

The temptation of this scripture, of course, is to control, and predict, the when's and where's and who's of the second coming. Or, to disregard it completely. I think both are a mistake.

In this text from the Gospel of Luke, there is certainly an emphasis on watchfulness, which is a mark of the season of Advent that we enter into today. Just as you know that summer is near by the leaves sprouting on the fig trees, so you'll know when the time has come. Wait. Watch. Be present.

But this isn't just an individual emphasis for this Gospel - there is also a strong emphasis on the character of Christian communities as we await this coming. We are called to not get caught up in the excessive pleasures or worries of the day, to not give into the balm of busy-ness that distracts from the deep inner work that this season invites. We are called to reject both the despair of the hopeless and the temptation to simply look away.

I get that, and still there is something that draws me deep into both of these temptations – maybe you know that feeling too? For me, it's Facebook. It elevates my anxiety, and envy, and sloth....it probably helps me access every deadly sin before 7am. It paralyzes me. And I'm drawn to it like catnip.

We all have our thing, right. The thing that draws us into the temptations of despair, or avoidance - these two poles that draw us out of community. It might be social media for some of you, though maybe another platform. Maybe it's shopping, or food, or drugs. Humans, throughout time, have all had their thing...listen again to how the Gospel speaks into that:

"Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap."

So how do we ground ourselves as a Christian community, in this moment, and this time, bound together in this counter cultural imperative to wait, to watch, to stay attuned to the things that are in front of us right now? How do we say no to these temptations of avoidance and despair?

Paul, writing to the early Christian community in Thessalonica, as they awaited Christ's ushering in of God's new day: "may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you."

There is something about living a life in love, loving one another, loving all, that grounds communities. Stay focused on what's in front of you, pay attention, but don't give into despair. Look for the new leaves sprouting from the fig tree, and I will be there soon. And, body of Christ, do it together. Because without one another, it's impossible.

There is SO MUCH to distract us from this simple admonition, and so much life to be found within it. In the paring down of our lives. Into the waiting, and hoping, and longing for God's new day to arrive.

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And so we have the gift of Advent, the beginning of our year together as a church. Advent, which invites us to sit poised in time, knowing that God is present here, on earth, and that God's redemption of this world has not yet fully happened. We know that there is so much suffering in this world, loneliness, and violence, heartbreak and loss. There is so much that has yet to be accomplished before God's new day can be known. This text, and our 24 hour news cycle, certainly bears witness to all of that.

But we also know that in Advent, we are called to imagine what God's love looks like, concretized on earth. Scripture gives us imagination around this, and we are given permission to let our dreams run wild, without having to actualize any of them. Just as Mary grew rounder and rounder as God took human form within her, so we wait for God and God's new day, the redemption of our world, and we let that vision ripen and grow in us.

But we don't just sit there - we wait actively, drawn now into the present moment. We watch for glimmers of God's inbreaking light, glimpses and sometimes gulps of beauty, and healing, and wholeness, mercy and justice.

- We listen to children giggling as the first, fat snowflakes fall
- We celebrate a minute policy change at the county level that lets scores of home owners keep their houses heated this winter.
- We remember the press of a friend or lover's hand as we did something unbelievably hard...

By bearing witness to the small, the particular, we are given a window into the infinite. We watch for signs of God's kingdom amongst us, catching the vision, and waiting for the time to hold our heads up, because we know not only that our redemption is drawing near, but that our redemption has already drawn near in Jesus.

And so, when families fleeing persecution are tear gassed at our Southern border, we can remind each other to stand up and raise our heads, for our redemption has already drawn near in Jesus. When we read reports of our climate changing rapidly and we feel despair pressing in, we can remind each other to stand up and raise our heads, for our redemption has already drawn near in Jesus. When we can no longer tolerate difference, and find it easier to retreat to our corners of comfort, we can remind each other to stand up and raise our heads, for our redemption has already drawn near in Jesus.

In this Advent season, we are called to live deeply into the freedom we find in Christ, into the hope that stares down fear, into the light that shatters darkness. We are, you are, I am, called to dream dreams, and cast visions. As we grow ripe with dreams of God's new day, we know that we will be called to give birth, to stand up and raise our heads so that we might see it enfleshed in our world.

But before that, we pause. Yes, even in the midst of frenetic holiday preparations, and too many parties, and for the students amongst us – finals. We must pause, if only for a moment, from all that the world demands from us, so in that rest, our hope can have room to grow. As you go forth from this place, live as people of Hope. Keep your eyes open for signs of God's love and justice, and recognize them as hope for God's new day. Christmas is coming. But first, we wait. And we prepare, with God, to birth a new world. May it be so. Amen. Amin.