

Sermon for Advent I

The Text: Luke 21:26-35

We could probably all recall a time where we experienced a ferocious and fearful storm. For some, storms such as these can come with devastating consequences—the roof being lifted off someone's house, a pole crashing across someone's car, or someone's home being destroyed by uprooted trees. Storms with such disastrous effects are terrifying!

Perhaps this is a glimpse of the upheaval and distress many will have on the day Jesus returns. In today's reading, Jesus says that people will be faint from fear and in distress and perplexity about what is to come. As we turn the page of the church calendar from last week's end of the church year to the beginning of a new one with this first Sunday of Advent, the themes of desolation and God's judgment at Christ's return continue with graphic, apocalyptic imagery.

Jesus' focus in Luke 21 shifts from his promise in last week's text that "not one stone [of the Temple] will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down" to a warning of a rapidly worsening and widening desolation before the end comes: "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven. There will be persecution for the disciples and by extension God's people, hated because they bear Jesus' name, with some even being put to death. The capital city Jerusalem will be left desolate, the holy city and symbol of Israel's splendour, prosperity and greatness will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles. There will be great distress in the land and wrath."

In today's text, Jesus paints the picture of an even worse calamity—one of inescapable magnitude: the heavens and the earth will pass away. The term 'heavens and earth' is Jewish shorthand for all that there is, so just as in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth—all things—at the end of time all things will topple like the temple. All three areas of observable creation in our experience—earth, sea and sky—will be affected with catastrophic upheaval. The sun, moon and stars which God created to be signs to order and regulate time will now be signs of the end of time. The powers of the heavens will be shaken. There will be a roar and tossing of the

sea. In ancient thought, the sea was seen as some kind of chaos-monster and the home of evil, surging beneath the watery mass. There will be a reverting back to how things were before God brought order out of chaos in the beginning. The imagery pictured in Psalm 46 comes to mind, with the waters roaring and foaming and the mountains quaking and falling into the heart of the sea. There will be great apprehension on the earth, and people will faint from fear. And then the Son of Man will appear coming in a cloud with power and great glory.

“This is the Gospel of the Lord” comes the acclamation. The congregation responds: “Praise be to you O Christ!” Pretty scary sort of gospel, isn’t it. But it *is* Good News. Don’t we long for God to flex his muscles and bring an end to evil that results in so much violence and injustice and terrorism and so many wars, the carnage of drug addiction, the spite and anger in society that treats the vulnerable like trash, family breakdown that spirals into cycles of ongoing abuse, so much that corrupts our society at a younger age than ever before, and everything that rips hearts apart and brings so much pain?

All this comes from human hearts darkened by sin, resistant to God, and incapable of heeding his call to put others first. All this ultimately comes from hearts that reject Jesus—this is what Jesus means when he says: “this generation will not pass away” until he returns.

Jesus isn’t talking about a literal generation that will pass away before he returns, as if there is actually a 2,000 year old person somewhere still alive on the earth today. He is talking about the people of the day who resisted Jesus, and opposed him, and finally rejected him, even to the point of viciously killing him. This generation still hasn’t passed away, for the rejection of Christ is, in a nutshell, what sin is, something that is deeply entrenched in the human DNA and will be until Christ comes again.

When we recognise that although we haven’t participated in evil to the magnitude that we witness on our TV screens, yet we, nonetheless, are part of this spectrum of sin; and that our blasphemy, our uncaring words, our white lies, our secret attitudes and unloving actions, our jealousy and refusal to forgive, are no trifling matters, then we begin to grasp the reality of our situation. So we come under the same sentence we are often quick to apply to those who sin against us, and thus also deserve to be swept

away with the fury of the end times. All that can help us, then, is the gospel. But where *is* the gospel in today's text?

While Jesus warns that heaven and earth will indeed pass away, he promises that his words--his teaching and promises for his church--will never pass away. The words of Jesus will not pass away, because they are the words of the new temple who could not be destroyed and who rose again from the dead for you, and who lives forever. Just as he urged his first disciples, so too he urges us: "Watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down of in self-indulgence, in drunkenness and anxieties of the things of this life, and that day will come upon you suddenly and will close on you unexpectedly like a trap, upon all those who live on the face of all the earth. Always be watching and praying in order that you might be able to overcome and escape all these things about to happen, and stand fast in the presence of the Son of Man" (Luke 21:34-36).

How do we keep watch of ourselves lest we be led away from living with God by the anxieties of the things of this life? How do we stand fast in the presence of the Son of Man, now, in this world? We do so by coming to Christ's words of eternal truth, for this life and the next, that they might continually shape our life.

When this world comes to an end and passes from existence and the New heaven and the New earth come into being, Jesus says in Matthew's Gospel, that when he, the Son of Man comes in glory, those who have rejected God's grace will be consigned to depart from him, into the punishment prepared for the devil and his angels (Matthew 25:41-43). But those who hear and keep Jesus' word will inherit the Kingdom he has prepared for the saints of all time and places. This really is good news! Jesus tells us that when these catastrophic things begin to take place, "stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

For us who believe, and watch and wait, these calamities will not be the end reality, but only a sign that we will be about to see the fulfilment of the redemption in Christ he has promised to us in the Scriptures. Rather than cowering in fear in Jesus' presence or running to hide, Jesus himself calls us to stand as the people he has purchased to be his very own and reconciled to God, so that you are no longer enemies of God but his friends—and even more than friends, God's own children who share in the inheritance of Jesus, the Son.

So, on the day of Jesus' return we have reason to straighten up and lift our heads with joy and confidence as we look toward the heavens to see the Christ as he comes to meet us, bringing the glory of the eternal Kingdom for his people, who hear the word of God and treasure it.

It is the words of Jesus himself that give his church this hope that the world cannot give. For what hope can anyone or anything that is about to perish, possibly give?! We, on the other hand, have been counted worthy by God because of the worthiness of his Son, which has become our own in baptism, the benefits of which are received through faith, so that although all these things will come to pass, we shall escape them and stand before the Son of Man without shame.

The things which Jesus speaks of in today's Gospel reading have already begun. Since the birth of Christ, and particularly since his death and resurrection, the end is near. The Temple has been destroyed. There have been terrible wars and rumours of more wars and nations and kingdoms in uproar with one another. There have been earthquakes and famines and pestilences. This just shows that what Jesus speaks of is true. But these events do not mean that God has withdrawn his gracious presence from us, or that the calamities in our personal lives are some kind of punishment from him. If anything he uses them to draw us close to him to be our refuge and shelter.

You and I don't have to wait until the day Jesus returns for him to be present with his favour and mercy. Our redemption draws near *even now*. He is with us every day, when we sleep and when we wake, and every breath in between, so that nothing we experience in this life is unattended by God. God is with us through it all. He hears all our sighs. He comes to soothe our anxious hearts and carry away our fears and burdens.

Our redemption has drawn near to us again today in a special way, as our Saviour Jesus Christ has absolved us in this earthly sanctuary, so that the sins he has loosed have been loosed in the sanctuary in heaven. He has spoken his Gospel to us today and through his sure promises he gives us hope and peace that the world cannot give. He will pray with us and intercede for us.

At the end of the service he will bless us, so that we are able to stand straight and look up to greet him when he comes in glory—the final fulfilment of everything we hope for, which he has promised to us and all his other saints of all times and places who he has washed by his precious blood. Amen.