

November 28, 2021
Rev. Kerry Smith

Joy in the Darkness
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Luke 21:25-36

New Revised Standard Version

"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. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

"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, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. 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."

God is doing a new thing, again. We hear in our scripture today from Luke's Gospel that God is not constrained by time represented by calendar and clock. In God's time, past and future are woven together for the sake of today. And through it all, God is near.

We are all decorated for Christmas here at Greenland Hills. It takes me a long time to put out all of the Christmas decorations and to hang the ornaments on the Christmas tree. I remember the story behind each ornament and bore everyone in my house as I remind them of the story too. Some of the ornaments on the tree are really old, from when Lee and I were kids. The words we read from Luke remind me that when we look forward to the future, we take with us our past. In the Lion King Pumbaa and Timon teach us that we have to put our past behind us. But, the lessons of the past stay with us.

The fig tree reminds us when buds begin to form on empty trees that winter will end and summer will arrive because we have lived through a change of seasons. We know life will continue and life will change. No matter how much it seems that the world is coming undone, God will still be God.

Today is the first day of Advent. Its origins are unknown, but Advent is believed to have begun as a period of preparation for baptism. By the fifth century, the preparation lasted six weeks like Lent, but at the end of the fifth century, Pope Gregory I changed it to a four-week period. There is evidence that the Christian year began on Christmas Day and that Advent was the final period of the year, suggesting an orientation toward the second coming of Christ. The period Advent was more a celebration of Jesus' second coming than his birthday.

Every Advent we light the candle. Today's candle is to symbolize the hope of Advent. Hope seems to be missing in action lately, doesn't it? Our present reality includes wars, climate catastrophe, global pandemic, unemployment, hate crimes, racist ideologies, illness, and so much more. Our hearts are weighed down because we are trapped in fear and despair. Luke tells us when these things take place, when it seems like life is hopeless, it is then that we stand up and raise our heads because God's redemption is drawing near.

I hope we are reminded today that there have always been voices calling out for hope in the midst of injustice, prejudice and despair. These voices have always been there, but we've just sometimes chosen not to listen. We light the candle today not to drown out the darkness, but to illuminate what we have to learn from it. It is God who restores our hope and God who promises justice and righteousness. God helps us to live as people of hope in this sometimes hopeless world.

In Kate Bowler's new book, *No Cure For Being Human*, she says, "Part of the mystery of the Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – is that we believe the divine is behind us, with us, and before us. We are pulled toward eternity believing that God is already there."¹ The question for us today is if we have eyes to see the signs, and the good sense to be ready. There are signs all around us to show us that God is here, that the presence and the power of God is here.

The other week in Youth/Confirmation we were talking about Communion. Jesus uses simple things like bread and juice to remind us that God's love and grace is here. I asked the kids to think of another simple object that can remind us of God's love and grace. Audrey Hale called out pencil. It is made out of wood, which reminds us that God is the creator. Pencils also create and can erase which reminds us that God forgives when we miss the mark and sin.

As we begin the season of Advent, we are waiting for Christ's coming. I don't like waiting. I want to know how long I have to wait. You see, I'm not very good at being patient. We have to have patience in the face of promises yet to be kept; patience in the meantime of enduring illness, broken relationships, and unrealized expectations or hopes; and patience after all our patience has run out. Patience it seems was also an issue for the new Christian community as it waited for the day of the Lord.

When we think about Christ's final return we always want to know specifics: who, when, where, what, why and how. When will this happen and what will be the sign that this is about to take place? There is a booth every year at the State Fair of Texas that has a calendar and a pamphlet and they seem to know exactly when Christ will return. Dispensationalism might be a new term for you. Dispensationalist themes form the basis of the popular Left Behind series. Those who are dispensationalists claim they know exactly how the world is going to end. They know because of the descriptions of time periods, what they call dispensations, that they see in the scriptures via a method of literal interpretation. But, the scripture we read is deliberately vague about when Jesus will return. There are no hints about a timetable. All we get is a parable about fig trees sprouting leaves telling us that summer is near.

Do you ever feel like time is passing so fast? Sometimes I look at my hands and wonder when I turned into an old lady because hands don't lie. Over Thanksgiving I kept staring at my aunt. Her hair has turned white since I saw her at Easter. I remember Lee going to the doctor a few years ago because something hurt and the doctor said, welcome to getting older. Time passes so fast with relationships. Have you ever been too busy to keep in touch with a friend and before you know it, you have lost touch.? Or you get so wrapped up in work or responsibilities, you realize that you have only said good morning and good night to your family in the last week?

To prepare for Jesus' future coming, we need to notice and respond to Jesus' current presence. Jesus says we are to be on guard and not get caught up in worry or excess. We are to be alert, watching confidently for Christ's return. We are to be at prayer so that we are sprouting leaves and bearing figs as good fig trees should do at the end of summer. The scripture we read talks more about how we shall live in the meantime instead of when these things will happen. So, out of all of our questions: who, when, where, what why and how, the most important is how.

Jesus says, "Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." When bad things happen, when people faint from fear of what is happening in our world, it is then that we stand up and raise our head because we know the end of the story has been written by the resurrected Christ. When we watch the news and don't know if we should ever leave the safety of our home again, we stand up and raise our heads because our redemption has already drawn near in Jesus.

¹ P. 76.

Just as in the time of Jesus, fear is our greatest threat. Fear drives us to forget who we are, to see people in need as the enemy, and to place securing our safety and comfort above meeting the basic needs of those in distress. When we are afraid we forget who we are and we forget whose we are. We forget what we were created for and we forget what we are called to do.

At Greenland Hills we are called to be a people of light and hope, courage and confidence that welcome all those struggling with fear and darkness. The season of Advent comes at the darkest time of the year, just when we most need it, to help us remember that the light of Christ shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. When we begin to grow afraid, we are called to support one another so we stand up and raise our heads knowing that our redemption draws near.

Advent invites us to be watchful and alert for God who is our redeemer, who loves us with an everlasting love from which nothing, not even death itself, can separate us. Thanks be to God, Amen.