November 29, 2015

Luke 21:25-36

*Watching*

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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.”

In our church enews this week, our music minister Kristi Hassell shared a history 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. Kristi shared that also around this time, there is evidence that the liturgical year began with the vigil Mass of Christmas 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.

In the United Methodist Church, Advent is four weeks long, and each of the four Sundays has a specific theme, the first Sunday being Christ’s coming in final victory. During these next weeks of Advent we will be talking about Christ’s birth, Christ’s continual coming to us in Word and Spirit, and Christ’s final return.

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?[[1]](#footnote-2) 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, so in a similar way the signs of the coming kingdom will be transparent to the Christian community.[[2]](#footnote-3)

Do you ever feel like time is passing so fast? Sometimes I look at my hands and wonder how I am looking at my mom’s hands. Hands don’t lie. Over Thanksgiving we saw an old friend that we hadn’t seen in a year. His hair turned gray in a year! And I kept staring at my aunt while we were eating on Thanksgiving, her hair has begun turning white since I saw her a few months ago. I sat next to my older cousin at Thanksgiving, her kids are all grown, and she wanted to make sure that I realized how fast these years will go by. She said before you know it you will be driving your 8 and 11 year old to college. While I am preoccupied with adult worries and adult responsibilities, my kiddos are going to grow up and I will wonder where the time has gone. I already think that![[3]](#footnote-4)

I remember Lee going to the doctor a few years ago because something hurt and the doctor said, welcome to getting older. And relationships, have you ever been to 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 spouse in the last week?

We are really good at selective noticing, but to prepare for Jesus' future coming, we need to notice and respond to Jesus’ current presence.[[4]](#footnote-5) Jesus says we are to be on guard not getting 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.[[5]](#footnote-6) The scripture we read is more worried about how we shall live in the meantime instead of when these things will happen.[[6]](#footnote-7) 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.”

So, when the 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.[[7]](#footnote-8) “When we are too afraid to admit to our country those seeking a safe home for fear they may be terrorists, we can remind each other to stand up and raise our heads, for our redemption has already drawn near in Jesus. When the violence of our city streets push us to abandon civil rights and protections for all people regardless of their race or ethnicity, we can remind each other to stand up and raise our heads, for our redemption has already drawn near in Jesus.”[[8]](#footnote-9)

Just as in the time of Jesus, fear is our greatest threat. It is “fear that 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.”[[9]](#footnote-10) 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.

In this place we are called to be a place of light and hope, courage and confidence that welcome all those struggling with fear and darkness.[[10]](#footnote-11) 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.[[11]](#footnote-12) And 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.[[12]](#footnote-13)

As we move into this new week, remember that 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.

1. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/11/advent-1-c-stand-up-and-raise-your-heads/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/11/advent-1-c-stand-up-and-raise-your-heads/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. idea about selective noticing taken from http://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/Advent-Possible-Alyce-McKenzie-11-28-2012?offset=1&max=1 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. http://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/Advent-Possible-Alyce-McKenzie-11-28-2012?offset=1&max=1 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. http://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/Advent-Possible-Alyce-McKenzie-11-28-2012?offset=1&max=1 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/11/advent-1-c-stand-up-and-raise-your-heads/ [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/11/advent-1-c-stand-up-and-raise-your-heads/ [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/11/advent-1-c-stand-up-and-raise-your-heads/ [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/11/advent-1-c-stand-up-and-raise-your-heads/ [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/11/advent-1-c-stand-up-and-raise-your-heads/ [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/11/advent-1-c-stand-up-and-raise-your-heads/ [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. http://www.davidlose.net/2015/11/advent-1-c-stand-up-and-raise-your-heads/ [↑](#footnote-ref-13)