

Luke 21:25-36

²⁵“There will be signs in the sun, moon, and stars. And on the earth nations will be in anguish, in perplexity at the roaring of the sea and the surging waves, ²⁶people fainting from fear and expectation of the things coming on the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. ²⁸But when these things begin to happen, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is near.”

²⁹He told them a parable. “Look at the fig tree and all the trees. ³⁰As soon as they are sprouting leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is actually near. ³¹So also, when you see these things happening, know that the kingdom of God is near. ³²Amen I tell you: This generation will not pass away until all these things happen. ³³Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

³⁴“Watch yourselves or else your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and the worries of this life, and that day may come on you suddenly. ³⁵For it will come like a trap on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶Stay alert all the time, praying that you may be able to escape all these things that are going to happen and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.”

Hope

Children all across our land are being encouraged to get ready. A jolly, rotund, red-suited man is starting to watch their every move. Perhaps he’s been watching all year, but if you really get on your game of behaving, perhaps you can make up for the mistakes made earlier in the year. You want to be good, you see, so that you get more goodies. This rotund fellow is expected to bring presents to all the good girls and boys. And so, they say, Santa Claus is coming to town—bearing gifts.

Our Sunday Advent sermons will all revolve around the theme: He Comes, Bearing Gifts. The One coming with gifts doesn’t mean the rotund, red-suited fellow, though, does it? Christmas is about Jesus. Even though many don’t know what Christmas is really all about, we have a great opportunity during the season leading up to Christmas to invite others to come and hear about Jesus. That’s what our Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod is focusing on with the concept of C18—Christmas of 2018—inviting people to come to church to hear about Jesus.

Starting this week we will have four Sundays that focus on the gifts Jesus brings: hope, peace, joy, and love. Use these thoughts to invite others to worship the Savior-King at Christmas—and beyond.

That’s our introduction to the whole series for Advent. Now let’s start really looking at the Gospel before us today.

I.

Hope. That’s the theme for today. Hope is to be the focus for the first gift we consider that Jesus brings. Did his words in today’s Gospel convey lots of hope to you? At first glance the lesson seems to show pretty much the opposite. One of the phrases that just jumps off the page at me is this: “People fainting from fear and expectation of the things coming on the world” (Luke 21:26, EHV).

The 1970’s covered a wide range of my school years. I started the decade at the age of 8, and ended the last half of 1979 in the middle of my senior year in high school. Fear is a thing I remember from that decade. There was fear that the world might end with nuclear holocaust. There were nuclear war drills in school where we would crawl under our desks and were instructed not to look at the flash or the mushroom cloud if ever we would be in a real nuclear war situation.

There was the 1975 article in Newsweek that talked about the coming mini Ice Age. The man who wrote that article now says the scientific data were inaccurate or incomplete—or perhaps

misunderstood. He now says that it is incontrovertible that the planet is actually warming.

Three years ago an article appeared with very little fanfare which says we are at the brink of the Maunder Minimum. Sunspot activity will change drastically around the year 2022, and we will definitely enter a period of cooling. One person who wrote on the phenomenon ended her piece this way: “There are many processes that contribute to climatic variations, and human-induced climate change will likely prove too big a force for muted solar activity to influence” (<https://tinyurl.com/y9yvr3wy>).

Warming or cooling, fear about what is going to happen, dominates the human psyche. At least 3 times we have passed drop-dead dates for the earth that I can remember, and now there is a new one—we have 10 years to correct the problem, or it will be irreversible.

I pick on the whole climate change debate because so many people are filled with such fear about what might happen. Elon Musk insists that his company will be ready to colonize Mars in his lifetime, and Bill Nye the Science Guy says he and all who believe him are nuts to think it is possible any time soon. Many are filled with fear and convinced the human race is doomed.

II.

“There will be signs in the sun, moon, and stars. And on the earth nations will be in anguish, in perplexity at the roaring of the sea and the surging waves, ²⁶people fainting from fear and expectation of the things coming on the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken” (Luke 21:25-26, EHV).

Jesus told us there would be signs in our natural world that indicate that the end of the world will be “soon.” The disciples hearing him speak live in Judea the day he spoke these words could look around them and see the signs he pointed out. The Heavenly Father hasn’t specifically defined “soon.”

“He told them a parable. ‘Look at the fig tree and all the trees. ³⁰As soon as they are sprouting leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is actually near. ³¹So also, when you see these things happening, know that the kingdom of God is near’” (Luke 21:29-31, EHV).

You probably had to rake some leaves a few weeks ago. If you put it off because the leaves hadn’t all fallen yet, you found that a blanket of snow is making things more difficult. Leaves coming off the trees in the Fall is the way we know winter is approaching. When buds start to come on the trees, you know that Spring and Summer are just around the corner. The signs Jesus gives help us realize that he will soon be coming back.

Are you filled with fear about that? Are you so worried about global warming or global cooling or general climate change that you think God doesn’t have power over the seasons of the year? Does fear dominate you—fear about the climate, or any one of a million other things going on in the world?

“Watch yourselves or else your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and the worries of this life, and that day may come on you suddenly” (Luke 21:34, EHV). It’s no fun living in fear all the time. The word translated “carousing” can refer to the nausea or headache a person gets from drinking too much. Overindulgence in the things of this world—whether alcohol or drug abuse or sexual sins or some other focus on the world—is what many do to shut off their anxiety and fear about the things they hear about on the news every day and the things they witness personally in their own lives or in society.

III.

How would you define hope? Most of us usually use the word to mean some desire for a favorable outcome. One might “hope” it doesn’t rain to spoil the weekend. At the very same time, a farmer might “hope” it rains so his crops get their needed moisture. That kind of “hope” is uncertain.

At first glance the Gospel for today seemed to be bereft of hope. The signs Jesus spoke of have “People fainting from fear and expectation of the things coming on the world” (Luke 21:26, EHV).

But not you. Fear is tied to uncertainty. Uncertainty comes to so many because they can see the

sin in their lives, even if they try hard to ignore it. Their conscience continues to remind them that there is a God and they are accountable to that God.

Your fear is allayed because you know that Jesus has taken away the need for that all-surpassing fear. Your sins have been paid for. Your guilt and shame have been covered by his blood. You have redemption in his blood.

“When these things begin to happen, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is near” (Luke 21:33, EHV). Though Jesus has already done everything needed to fulfill your redemption—the salvation from your sins—while you still live on this planet and live this life you have not and will not experience the full realization of that redemption. Your glory is yet to come—in heaven.

“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away” (Luke 21:33, EHV). You have hope. It isn’t just a ethereal desire for a favorable outcome. When the Bible talks about hope it has a much, much stronger connotation. “Hope” is always connected with the promises of God. Jesus assures us that his words—his promises—will never pass away. That means that the hope we have is not some pie-in-the-sky hope. The hope of heaven for those who believe in the redemption Jesus won is real. It is certain. It is tied to God and his promises. It is tied to the reality Jesus has won on the cross.

IV.

So...what do you do? “Watch yourselves or else your hearts will be weighed down...and that day may come on you suddenly” (Luke 21:34, EHV). Be alert. You know the time is coming for Jesus to return. As you prepare to celebrate his first coming, be prepared also for his second coming. You know the temptations that are particular to *your* life and *your* attitudes and actions. Avoid things that put you in danger of succumbing. Strengthen yourself using the Gospel in Word and Sacrament to keep prepared to face all those temptations.

“Stay alert all the time” (Luke 21:36, EHV). It’s like being the night watchman. Live with an expectation that *this* could very well be the time Jesus comes back. Don’t let him find you sleeping.

“Stay alert all the time, praying that you may be able to escape all these things that are going to happen and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man” (Luke 21:36, EHV). One of the best ways to stay alert is to pray. Talk to God. Ask him to give you the strength you need to always be on the watch and always be ready to stand before the Son of Man.

Life in the time between Jesus’ first and second comings is not easy. There is suffering and strife and pain. Everyone has to deal with it. Sometimes it is even more intense for the believer than the unbeliever. But believers have hope. The hope we have in the promises of God gives us the ability to live joyful lives. We have a sure hope for a future in heaven. Now, during Christmas 2018, invite others to join you to learn of the sure hope you have for a certain future with Jesus. Amen.