

First Sunday in Advent – December 2, 2018

Luke 21:25-36

25 “There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. 26 Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. 27 At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. 28 When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” 29 He told them this parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees. 30 When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. 31 Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near. 32 “I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. 33 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. 34 “Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap. 35 For it will come upon all those who live on the face of the whole earth. 36 Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.”

In four weeks it will be a familiar theme. As the end of the calendar year approaches and the new year begins, people will talk about their New Year’s resolutions. You might have made some in the past yourself, trying something new and different, trying to break an old habit. Maybe it worked, maybe it didn’t. A lot of the time those resolutions may be kept for a short time, but then you revert back to form. Maybe you never even get around to attempting the resolution that you made. But then again, you tell yourself, there’s always next year. So why talk about New Year’s resolutions a month in advance? Well today we are celebrating a new year—it is the first Sunday of the new church year, the first Sunday of Advent. We have cycled through the different seasons of the church year and now again arrive at this season of preparation. And so this morning we will consider some **Advent Resolutions** on the basis of our text from Luke 21. The first one is to **Stand up and lift up your head** (v. 28) and the second one is to **Always be on watch and pray** (v. 36).

The season of Advent is a season of preparation. The word Advent means “coming” and during this season we focus on three different comings of Christ. First of all we look at his past coming as we prepare to celebrate Christ’s first coming to this earth, to take on human flesh. We also focus on how Christ presently comes to us, through the Gospel in the Word and the sacraments of Holy Baptism and Lord’s Supper. And finally we focus on the future coming of Christ, his return on the Last Day to judge the world. This last coming is the major focus of our text from Luke chapter 21.

Our text begins with verse 25, but Jesus was discussing the signs of the end of the age starting all the way back at verse 5. He was making reference to three different events throughout this section. First he spoke with his disciples about the destruction of Jerusalem, which would happen some forty years later. Secondly he spoke of the signs of the end times—the time we are living in right now—with wars, natural disasters, persecutions and false prophets. And then with verse 25 he turned to the signs that will happen at the very end of the world, when Judgment Day arrives: “There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. Men will

faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken” (vv. 25-26).

This is not exactly a picture of peace and serenity. We don't know exactly what these signs in the sun, moon and stars will be, but those heavenly bodies will be shaken and seas will be loud and have surging waves. Everyone on this earth will not be able to miss the second coming of Christ. It will be obvious and it will not be pleasant. There will be anguish and pain, terror and fear. There will be perplexity—they will not understand what is going on—and apprehension—they will be anxious about what happens next. Even though such things have been described on the pages of Scriptures for thousands of years, there will still be shock and amazement. “At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory” (v. 27). To top it all off, the Judge will return with all his glory, not quietly as when he was born in a stable.

What an awesome day and yet it seems scary even to us who have some idea of what is going to happen. Will we be overwhelmed by it all? Will we be too frightened at our Lord's coming? Will we not make it? The answer to these questions and our comfort for that day comes in verse 28, which contains our first Advent Resolution: “When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” We can stand up, literally straighten up under the load of fear and anxiety and lift up our heads to look at the sky because our redemption is drawing near. That day means our final deliverance has arrived. We have been redeemed from sin—on that day we will be freed from our sinful nature and the effects that sin has on this world. We have been redeemed from death—on that day we will be freed from physical death and eternal death in hell for an eternal life in heaven. We have been redeemed from the devil—on that day he will no longer be able to attack and tempt us. All this will be possible, not because we were especially good at enduring until the end, but because of Christ's first coming. He came to this earth to take on human flesh and live a perfect life without sin and die in our place and defeat the devil so that we could be redeemed. That is why we can stand up and lift up our heads when that day comes. Jesus mentioned that when a tree sprouts leaves, it means that summer is near (v. 30). So it is with these signs that will come—we will not be afraid because we know that the kingdom of God is near (v. 31) and we will be saved on that day.

As far as resolutions go, this one doesn't seem too hard right now, we won't have to stand up and lift up our heads until that last day comes. We can have that Advent resolution checked off on our list and who knows, Judgment Day will probably come long after we've passed away on this earth. It is easy to slip into this attitude when we do not see anything happening yet. But it is also a very dangerous position. Jesus warned against this attitude in verse 34: “Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap.” What is the danger of having such an attitude? We lose our focus and become wrapped up in the things of this world, things that burden and weigh down our hearts. Jesus spoke of dissipation—a lifestyle of excess—whether that be excessive drinking or wasteful living. As we go from Black Friday shopping into the Christmas season, it can be so easy for us to become wrapped up in the materialism of this world. Jesus spoke of drunkenness. Too often when hearts become heavy, there is the temptation to turn to the bottle to drown sorrows, a way of avoiding the problems and responsibilities of life. Jesus spoke of the anxieties of this life. What will happen to us? Will we be able to afford our monthly bills? Will our children be protected? Will we be able to keep our job? Will we graduate from school? Such worries can take our focus off of our Savior.

Jesus warned that the day “will close on you unexpectedly like a trap.” A bird or animal does not intentionally walk into a snare or trap in order to be caught, it catches them unawares. So will the last day come unexpectedly “upon all those who live on the face of the whole earth” (v. 35). Judgment Day could come at any time. Our own death could come at any time. If we are lost in dissipation, drunkenness or anxiety, the trap may close shut.

Which brings us to our second Advent Resolution in verse 36: “Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen.” We are to be always on the watch, always on the lookout for when the end will come. Not once in a while, not most of the time, but always. Rather than being wrapped up and weighed down with the things of this world, we focus on what is ahead. We continue to pray that we may avoid the pitfalls of this life and keep our focus on what lies ahead.

It sounds like a pretty tall order, doesn't it? Always be on watch, always pray, do not let your guard down. Something which if we look at ourselves we see does not always happen. But Jesus offers comfort and strength for us in verse 33: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.” God's words will not pass away, they will endure. He keeps all of his promises. And so during Advent we also speak of Christ coming to us in Word and Sacrament, the means of grace. There we find our strength to always keep watch and pray. Daily study of God's Word, weekly attendance at church, regular use of the Lord's Supper, constant remembrance of our baptisms—these are not things that we have to do because God requires them. They are our sources of strength and allow us stand up to the never-ending assaults of sin, Satan and the world. Always keeping watch and praying is only possible with the Gospel in Word and Sacrament which will never wear out or break down or stop strengthening us.

New Year's resolutions may come and go, but our Advent resolutions are different. The preparations we talk about during Advent for the various comings of Christ are not just meant for the month of December. They are for the whole year; they are for our whole lives. We can stand up and lift up our heads when that Last Day comes because Christ has redeemed us and we have nothing to fear. We can always be on watch and pray because our strength comes from God through his Word and Sacraments. We do not make these resolutions to make sure that we get ourselves to heaven. We make these resolutions because heaven is already ours and we are waiting for the Son of Man to take us home. Amen.