

Jeremiah 33: 14-16

Psalm 25: 1-9

Advent I 2024.

I Thessalonians 3: 9-13

St. Luke 21: 25-36

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“Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

Luke 21: 28

It’s appropriate for me to say, “Happy New Year to you all,” because in the Christian calendar, today is indeed the start of a new year. Today is a start of a new season, Advent... “Advent” means “coming,” and we are anticipating the celebration of Christmas – the coming of God in Jesus Christ, to redeem us for ever...

In current Canadian culture, Christmas has already started for many. But for Anglican Christians and many others, Christmas isn’t here quite yet. We are in a time of anticipation; a time of hope... Then we celebrate the Festival of Christmas, beginning the night of December 24, and carrying through to the Feast of the Epiphany on January 6. Christmas doesn’t *end* on December 25; rather, that is the beginning of the true celebration...

We anticipate celebrating Christ’s first coming as a baby in Bethlehem... However, Christians also believe that one glorious Day, Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead, and we need to be prepared for his *Second* Coming as well... So, Advent is about getting ready to meet Christ – in past in Bethlehem, and in the future as our merciful Judge... The readings for this morning are about the Lord Jesus teaching his friends about his Second Coming, and about the destruction of Jerusalem...

Let’s read the Bible well!... This means, knowing and understanding what we read, and applying the good news appropriately to our time. Part of reading the Bible well is to be aware of what kind of passages we are reading... The Bible is not a single book, but rather a collection of 66 books, letters, prophecies and poems – all inspired by God the Holy Spirit. As our Grade 10 English teachers probably reminded all of us, a poem is not meant to be read the same way as a letter, which is not to be read the same way as a history story – and we have all of these literary forms within the whole of the Bible. We have no reason to be alarmed, that there are different expressions of the good news within the whole of the Bible... I am absolutely confident that all of us can learn to read the Bible beautifully and well... (Part of my job is to help equip you to be confident students of the scriptures...)

It’s good for us to be aware that as Luke records the words of Jesus, Luke 21 records both a historical message – a prophecy for the living generation of listeners – and an “apocalyptic” message – about his Second Coming. History and end-time teachings are near each other on the page...

The history part is this: The Lord Jesus cautions his listeners that there will be a foreign invasion in Jerusalem, and the temple, the place of worship, will be destroyed, within a generation... Luke 21: 5-6:

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, [Jesus] said, 'As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.'

Verse 20: "When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come near..."

The Jewish listeners to Jesus at that time could not imagine the destruction of their beautiful place of worship! – but that is exactly what happened, about a generation later, in the year A.D. 70. Rashly, the Jewish leaders tried to rebel against the Roman conquerors, and the Roman army responded with typical ruthlessness and domination: Roman soldiers overran Jerusalem, including the sacred temple, utterly destroying it. (It was at this time, in the year 70, that Jewish people stopped offering animal sacrifices – for there was no altar, and no temple, upon which to offer the sacrifice...)

We cannot overstate how traumatic the destruction of the temple was to the Jewish people of the time. (Most Bible teachers believe that the Gospel according to St. Mark, with all its shocking immediacy of Christ's kingdom, was written right around the time of the destruction of the Jewish temple...)

So, Luke 21 records our Lord teaching about the destruction of the place of worship within the generation, in A.D.70, and that's exactly what took place... That's the historical event in the *first* century...

But within Luke 21, we also have "apocalyptic" teachings – teachings about when Christ will come again, revealed to all. "Apocalyptic" literature isn't meant for us to focus on the tiny edges; instead, we are supposed to be confronted with the power and majesty of the Creator of the universe, and God's judgement which will pierce every human heart... Apocalyptic parts of the Bible are meant to confront us with God's power and reign, and his perfect justice which will – make no mistake, which *will* – defeat all earthly kingdoms...

For example, horses were potent symbols of military might in the ancient Middle East. In Revelation 6: 2, the readers are confronted with the crowned servant of God who will conquer all evil: "I looked, and there was a white horse! Its rider had a bow; a crown was given to him, and he came out conquering and to conquer."

Another Apocalyptic book, Daniel, picks up on this theme of God's powerful rule over earthly kingdoms: "Then the court shall sit in judgement, and [the earthly king's] dominion shall be taken away, to be consumed and totally destroyed... (7: 26)"

With Apocalyptic literature, we're to see the big picture, of God's reign and justice, and our absolute surrender to him...

In Apocalyptic literature, images and numbers often are symbolic, not to be taken literally. For example, Revelation 7: 4 reads of exactly 144 000 elect. Jehovah's Witnesses have taken this number literally, that in the kingdom of heaven, there will be exactly 144 000 – no more, and no less... But these numbers are meant to be symbolic... Do we remember how many Jewish tribes there were? 12. How many apostles were there?... 12... 12 times 12 is... (let's get out our calculators) 12 times 12 equals 144. "Thousands" were often used in ancient Palestine to indicate a huge number... There was enormous significance for the early Christians that the reign of Jesus encompassed both the Jewish nation and the apostolic tradition of Jesus... All orthodox Christian teachers believe that "144 000" is not meant to be taken as a fixed literal number, but as a *symbol*, of the elect in the reign of Jesus Christ...

Sometimes apocalyptic literature uses symbolic images or numbers. It's meant to remind us of God's perfect reign and judgement...

So in Luke 21, we have both historical information (about the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D.70) and apocalyptic truth, meant to challenge our hearts and to raise our eyes...

Is there anything we can learn about preparing for the Second Coming, in Luke 21?... Yes. The Lord Jesus mentions that there will be unrest in nature, as his coming approaches: "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. (v. 25)" So, there will be unrest in nature... Jesus elsewhere mentions social unrest – among human relationships... Mark 13: 8: "For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs." And, Christ warns of breakdowns in family relationships. Verse 12: "Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death..." So, overall, there is a sense there will be trouble in nature, and a breakdown in relationships, before the return of Christ Jesus...

What are we to do about all this?.. We aren't supposed to worry – our Lord tells us this, time and time again (John 20: 21)... Don't be distracted by relatively trivial events in the moment ("the worries of this life" – v. 34). "Pray." And be ready to meet our Lord, whenever and wherever that might be - including in how we minister to the sick and the

broken. Luke 21: 36a: “Be alert at all times; praying...” and Matthew 25: 40: “And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you [showed care] to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me...” Perhaps the way that you and I will meet Jesus most clearly is – in caring for wounded people around us...

Now, there might be someone here this morning who wants to say something like this: “Preacher, it’s all very well to tell us about Advent and getting ready for his First and Second Coming. It’s nice for us to be reminded about different literature in the Bible, and that there’s both the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in A.D.70, and apocalyptic literature in Luke 21. I even kind of get it that apocalyptic literature is meant to help us see God’s majesty and judgement against the wicked... But what I really want to know is, Is the Second Coming, coming soon? Like, tonight or something? When you read us the Bible message that there is disorder in nature before the Lord’s return, that kind of sounds like the environmental groaning going on right now... And when you read about wars in the Bible, that makes me think about Ukraine and Gaza and Sudan and Haiti and all over right now... And when you read about family breakdown – well, I kind of don’t want to say this, but – it kind of sounds like my family!... And all the social unrest... Man, I read about street guns in Toronto and election fighting in the U.S.A. All this sounds pretty... topical... So, give it to me straight, preacher: Is Jesus going to show up tonight?....”

Well, I’m sorry to disappoint you, but no one – no one – can tell us when the time will come, when all time is past. We know “neither the day nor the hour,” reads Matthew 25: 13... I agree that we are in a particularly troubled period in world history right now. I personally believe that some kingdoms are falling... And yet – there have been lots of previous periods in world history which were pretty dark, and God sustained us through it all. This old world may chug along for a very, very long time yet...

What are we called to do?... To be ready to meet Christ. To be humble, and loving. To do our daily work. Second Thessalonians 3: 12 warns us against being so caught up about whether or not Jesus is about to show up, that we neglect our daily duties to work and to family... God is Sovereign. We’re not to worry. We’re called to carry God’s peace, by the Spirit of Jesus; and to live faithfully for him, all our days...

Thanks be to God.