

Sermon & Prayers for November 28, 2021
First Sunday in Advent
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Prayer of the Day

Stir up your power, Lord Christ, and come. By your merciful protection alert us to the threatening dangers of our sins, and redeem us for your life of justice, for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Luke 21:25-36

[Jesus said:] ²⁵“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. ²⁶People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. ²⁸Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

²⁹Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; ³⁰as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. ³¹So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³²Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. ³³Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³⁴“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, ³⁵like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶Be 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.”

Grace, mercy, and peace be yours in abundance, beloved children of God, from God our Creator, through the Lord Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Ame

We start our journey through Advent near the end. Over the next few weeks of readings from scripture, we will walk our way toward the beginning.

Today’s reading is from near the end of Luke’s gospel, just before the death and resurrection of Jesus. Next week, we will hear John’s prophecy in the wilderness, just before Jesus begins his adult ministry. Then, just before Christmas, we will approach the beginning with Mary’s song of praise as she and Elizabeth celebrate the impending births of their sons.ⁱ

We also begin at the end in another way.

This passage from Luke’s telling of the story is part of a genre of writing called “apocalyptic.” Apocalyptic literature, as Cornelius Plantinga summarizes it, is “an unveiling of the world that lies behind this world. It’s a revelation that tells about the transition from this age to the next.”ⁱⁱ

So, it's no wonder that passages like this are often associated with the "end times." Many of us most often assume that this and other passages like it are about the "second coming" of Jesus at the end of time to usher in the reign of God, finally and fully with a wholly new heaven and earth.

And the attendant calls to be on guard, be alert, and behave, lest we be caught unprepared for the final return of Jesus result in bumper stickers that say, "Beam me up, Lord!" or t-shirts that advise "Jesus is coming; look busy."

The call to be on guard, be alert, and behave can also foster anxiety about the future and fear about being left behind.

In the mid- to late-1990s, a series of novels purporting to describe what the end times and second coming will be like were quite popular. The first novel in the series was entitled "Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days." During the hey-day of the novels' popularity, a young mother shared with me a deep concern about her 12-year-old son. She had encouraged him to read these novels and he had become riddled with anxiety, paralyzed by fear, and was having nightmares about being left behind and left alone on a devastated planet. I suppose that it could have been said that this young boy was among the people whom Jesus said "will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world."

...Except that this boy's fear and foreboding were focused not on the troubles and travails of the world but on Jesus leaving him behind the next time he comes.

It's so important to pay careful attention to what scripture says and how it says it. In this apocalyptic passage, Jesus is not trying to instill fear and foreboding. No, Jesus describes the fear and foreboding that people have when there is travail, trauma, and turmoil in the world or in their lives and he offers a way through it. And Jesus does this, not as threat, but as promise.

"When these things begin to take place," Jesus says, "stand up and raise your heads, **because your redemption is drawing near.**"

"When you see these things taking place," Jesus says, "**you know that the kingdom of God is near.**"

So, how do we know when the kingdom of God is near? What are the signs that Jesus is coming?

As the New Testament scholar and teacher Audrey West puts it:

When the present reality includes wars and political tumult (distress among nations), climate catastrophe (signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars), global pandemic (breathless from fear and foreboding), unemployment, hate crimes, racist ideologies, death-dealing illness, displacement by terror, or anything else that traps people in fear or despair (weighs down hearts), it is then that we look for the coming of the Son of Humanity, the Christ whose promised future makes all the difference for today.

Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near (Luke 21:28).

The apocalyptic vision of Jesus – the “unveiling of the world that lies behind this world.” The “revelation that tells about the transition from this age to the next” – is this:

The assurance that even and especially in the face of despair-inducing devastation or fear-fueling frailty – whether caused by nature’s fury or human hubris – the reign of God will not be impeded. In fact, it’s in these very moments that Jesus draws near to offer hope and healing, renewal and resurrection, and to walk with us through the transition from this age to the next.

This is the reign of God that is swaddled in human flesh laying in a manger.

This is the gracious, life-giving kingdom of God unveiled behind the suffering of Christ on the cross.

This is the world remaking, resurrection rendering God who rose from the tomb bearing the scars of our wounds.

This is the Son of Humanity, Jesus, who draws near, who comes again and again and again, in the midst of heaven and earth passing away...often in ways, through people, and at times that we would least expect...to make all things new with justice and mercy, forgiveness and grace, love and new, abundant, and lasting life.

This is the One whose sign of drawing near is etched on our foreheads and whose Spirit holds us forever.

“Truly, I tell you,” Jesus says, “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.**”

This Advent, this trying time of waiting and expectation, travail and transition, rather than fostering fear, what do you say we encourage one another to stand up and raise our heads to be alert for and to welcome and share the promised gracious, life-giving, persistent, new-world-making kingdom of God come near, right here, right now?

Thanks be to God. Amen

Prayers of Intercessionⁱⁱⁱ

In this season of watching and waiting, let us pray for all people and places that yearn for God's presence.

A brief silence.

God of presence and peace, strengthen your church around the globe to proclaim the message of your love coming to the world. Open our hearts to recognize your face in all people and in all of creation. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

God of mighty redwoods and microscopic plants, fields and city parks, the wind and the waves, be a healing balm to our wounded planet. May we nurture what you have lovingly created. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

God of equity and compassion, bring righteousness and goodness to all peoples of the earth. Give a heart of discernment and integrity to leaders in our communities (*local, state, and national government officials may be named*). Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

God of comfort and care, be present with those who watch and wait. Come to all who await births, deaths, divorces, new unions, new jobs, retirements, healing, and life transitions of every kind (*especially...*). Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

God of promises kept and new dreams awakened, shelter your people from destructive storms. We pray for those whose lives have been upended by natural disasters (*especially...*), for the work of Lutheran Disaster Response, Lutheran World Relief, and other relief organizations. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Here other intercessions may be offered.

God of companionship and community, we give you thanks for the saints who journeyed with us and now abide in you. Even in distress and uncertainty, make us confident that your promises endure forever. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

God of new life, you come among us in the places, people, and times we least expect. Receive these prayers and those of our hearts, in the name of Jesus.

Amen.

ⁱ Audrey West, "Commentary on Luke 21:25-36" in **Working Preacher** for November 28, 2021. Two later references to Audrey's work come from this same article.

ⁱⁱ Cornelius Plantinga Jr., **The Christian Century**, December 6, 2000. <https://bit.ly/3nFUjcM>

ⁱⁱⁱ Prayers, including the Prayer of the Day, adapted from SundaysandSeasons.com.