

“Your Redemption is Drawing Near”

Happy New Year. I know that we haven't celebrated Christmas, or even turned the page on our calendars from November to December. It seems a little early to be wishing anyone a Happy New Year.

It doesn't receive as much fanfare as the Calendar New Year does, but the Church New Year is upon us. Around this time each year we enter into the first season of the Church Year, the season of Advent. In some ways, our celebration of Advent mirrors our New Year celebrations. In those celebrations, we look back on a year past and look ahead to the future. In Advent, we look back to the past as we consider the coming of our Savior on Christmas. We also look to the future to the Second Coming of Jesus on Judgment Day. And just as we recognize with each successive New Year the passing of time, so also with the Church Year: each year we enter reminds us that we have moved closer and closer to that day when Jesus will come again.

In our sermon text this morning, Jesus directs our attention to the last day, to Judgment Day. Today's gospel is a portion of a conversation that Jesus had with his disciples on the Tuesday of Holy Week, the week of his suffering and death. In their conversation Jesus warned his disciples about two events. The first was the destruction of Jerusalem. History records how that destruction took place exactly as Jesus had predicted. The people of Jerusalem suffered greatly at the hands of their enemies. They cried out in anguish and in fear, and ultimately their city was left in ruins.

But the destruction of Jerusalem was ultimately only a foretaste of a greater destruction that Jesus predicted: the destruction of the world on the last day. Jesus' disciples were trying to understand when the end would come, but Jesus did not give them times or dates. He alerted them to signs that would signal the approach of the last day. He spoke of wars and earthquakes and famines. He spoke of all sorts of fearful events that would precede his second coming. We have witnessed these general signs in the course of history and even around us in the world today.

In our text itself, then, Jesus alerts his followers to the signs that would more directly accompany his return to earth on Judgment Day. He says, **“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. <sup>26</sup> Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken.”** The seemingly stable, permanent world will be shaken. The behavior of the heavenly bodies will be altered. And the reaction will be predictable: terror, confusion, fear.

But the most fearful thing to come will not be the shaking of the sun or moon or stars. **“At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.”** We can understand the words, but is it even possible for us to imagine? What does such power and glory look like. The Bible also describes his coming this way: **“Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him”** (Revelation 1:7). Accompanied by angels, shining in glory, the perfect and holy Son of God will come down from heaven to a world of sinful people. Could our reaction be anything other than terror and confusion?

Unbelievably, it can. Though we deserve to be judged, though we are sin-stained souls to our very core, the coming of Jesus is our redemption. He says to us just as surely as he did to his disciples that day: **“When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”** This is the Advent message of hope. Just as we witness our Savior coming to live and to die in our place, so also we will witness our Savior returning to bring us to heaven and to share eternal life with us. Do not be afraid, because the sins that once separated us from God have been removed by him. Do not be afraid, your redemption is drawing near.

Do not be afraid when the heavenly bodies are shaken. Do not be afraid when the sky lights up with the glory of Jesus and his angels. Do not be afraid of wars and famines and earthquakes. Those who do not know Jesus can view all these signs only with fear and confusion. But for us who know Jesus as our Savior they are road signs on our way to heaven and markers of the time that is passing, bringing us closer and closer to our heavenly home.

That is exactly the point that Jesus makes in his parable: **“Look at the fig tree and all the trees. <sup>30</sup> When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. <sup>31</sup> Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near.”**

That’s a point that we often forget. Jesus warns us about what can happen when we do not recognize and appreciate the signs of the Last Day. **“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. <sup>35</sup> For it will come upon all those who live on the face of the whole earth. <sup>36</sup> 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.”**

So many things can capture our attention. We pursue pleasure and fun, leisure and distraction, and we lose sight of the signs. Be careful. Your hearts may be weighed down. We let the concerns and cares of this life, which are often legitimate and necessary cares and concerns, crowd out those things which are most important. Be on the watch. You don’t know the day. You don’t know the hour. At any moment, Jesus could return. That day could appear suddenly like a trap snapping shut on its prey.

It is frightening to think how the Devil can warp and twist the good gifts that God has given to people in this world. He can turn them from wonderful blessings into dangerous diversions. Satan teams up with the world around us to entice us away from the returning Savior. Our sinful flesh is eager to chase down paths that lead away from Christ. And without Christ in our hearts, without faith in him as our Savior, the last day is certainly a terrible trap.

Many today miss the urgency of our Savior’s words. Some two thousand years later, he has not yet returned. They even point to his comment about “this generation” to demonstrate that his prediction has failed. Remember however, that Jesus was talking about the destruction of Jerusalem in the same breath as he was the End of the world. That very generation did witness the destruction of Jerusalem, and today the world is full of people who still reject the Savior exactly as that generation did. Jesus may well be referring to that sort of people being present to the end of time.

For all these reasons Jesus encourages us to watch and pray. Be careful of even the subtle temptations that are all around us. Keep your eyes firmly fixed on Jesus as you wait for him to return.

How do we do that? Jesus has given us his Word. That precious message always turns our attention to our Savior from sin. It teaches us how we might live lives that reflect our faith and our thankfulness. It reminds us of the temptations that lurk all around us. Through it God strengthens our faith and keeps our eyes fixed firmly on him. Could there be any better reason to read and study our Bibles than these words of Jesus? He says, **“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.”**

In a world that seems so permanent, but isn’t, we have nothing else to hold onto. In a world where everything changes, here is a promise that does not. In a world where every New Year brings hope as well as fear, this is the promise that gives hope in all circumstances and for every situation. Happy New Year. Have a blessed Advent.