

“Singing of Redemption”

First Sunday of Advent: 2 December 2018

Preaching Text: Luke 21:25-36

Salado UMC, Salado, Texas

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**“Opera is when a guy gets stabbed in the back and,
instead of bleeding, he sings”** (Ed Gardner).

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After teaching on Wednesdays and preaching on Sundays from apocalyptic literature, someone suggested that it is too bad Methodists don't engage these ideas more. As I looked back over the last six weeks, I noticed that in Year B of the RCL that there are more than a few texts that deal with the doctrine of the last things/days (eschatology) and that the Bible presents this doctrine in an apocalyptic literary form.

For example, Isaiah 24-7, the book of Revelation, and Mark 13 are apocalyptic texts addressing last things. These texts chiefly declare for non-believers when the end comes—beware. Yet, for believers, the end signals both Christ's return to judge the living and the dead, but also a tour of duty for us in God's "New Creation" (see, also Isaiah 43:19, Jeremiah 31:22, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Galatians 6:15). Each year we use eschatological theology expressed in apocalyptic texts probably six or seven Sundays yearly around All Saint's Day, Ash Wednesday, Reign of Christ Sunday, and Advent 1.

Today's lesson is akin to those mentioned. Apart from the phrase "Then he told them a parable," our entire lesson is a "red-letter text"—which means these are Jesus' words in Bible editions having Jesus' words in red. Hear now Jesus' words:

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

[29] Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; [30] as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. [31] So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. [32] Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. [33] Heaven 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 catch you unexpectedly, [35] like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. [36] Be 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” (Luke 21:25-36).

We talk about “the end” as do other churches—although clearly not every Sunday. But we do know that everything comes to an end—eight track tape players, the abacus, and the Roman Empire, for example. Life today is “planned obsolescence.” This means that we make things to break, wear out, or

become outdated quickly—soon replaced by another version of the same. We mostly expect things to deteriorate.

The first Sunday of Advent safeguards the church's memory of the Messiah's return "to judge the quick and the dead" (THE APOSTLES' CREED). Luke's text affirms that there are at least three things with which God arms believers awaiting Christ's return.

The first thing by which Luke arms believers is what we might call a "head's up." Luke's Gospel reflects on "signs and persecutions" (21:7-19) and "foretells the destruction of Jerusalem" (21:21-24). Beginning today's text, Luke logs some quite horrid things that the world can expect: signs, distress, confusion, and fainting. In other words, as God prepares the world for Jesus' arrival, a lot of unpleasant things will abruptly emerge. When things begin to shake, our instincts tell us to cover our heads and get down. Regularly at East Rock Creek Elementary school we would practice civil defense drills and cover our heads and get down. If you have been unfortunate enough to be in an airplane with the kind of turbulence that dislodges the airline oxygen masks then you know—cover your head and get down.

Ironically, when Jesus runs his list of "signs and distresses" he tells his followers: "Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near" (Luke 21:28). Jesus tells us to raise our heads because not only is our redemption drawing near, but we receive that redemption with courage and hope! The divine gives us a head's up because the Lord is near.

Second, God in Christ arms us with trust. Trust is a foundation of any relationship—whether between humans or connecting us with God. The funny thing about trust is that it is like a reputation. Trust can take years to build, but demolished in mere seconds. The penalty of wronged trust can hurt a person, a family, or a friendship. What this text offers to arm believers with is an unshakeable trust in God. When Luke writes: "Truly I tell you, 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," Luke offers us the assurance that we can trust God.

In a Bob Dylan song called, *Clean-Cut Kid*, Dylan puts our human desire for relationship with God and each other like this: "Well, everybody's asking why he couldn't adjust . . . All he ever wanted was somebody to trust." If life arms us with trust, then we possess a wonderful tool for human life.

Finally, the last thing with which Luke arms believers is what we might call "waiting while many other things interfere and interrupt." I like what the late Roman Catholic priest and scholar Henry Nouwen wrote about interruptions: "You know . . . my whole life I have been complaining that my work was constantly interrupted, until I discovered that my interruptions were my work." Interruptions often interfere with faithful waiting and yet

Patient waiting is not easy to do—for small children or large adults. As you recall, Luke's Jesus tells the disciples to "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap." We don't have to be involved in dissipation or drunkenness to be inattentive to the signs around us.

I used to drive around the Metro-plex quite a bit and regularly listen to traffic reports on KRLD. Every eight minutes these reports let drivers know where they do not want to go. I tried very hard to pay attention and hear the report, but invariably one thought or worry or another weighed me down and I missed the report. Sometimes I tried so hard that when the report came on, say at 8:38 a.m., I

thought to myself, "I'm finally locked in and have not missed the report." Yet, after a jiffy of such thought, I realized in my self-congratulations that I had missed the report yet again!

Arm yourself this Advent with a head's up from on high. Seize the divine relationship of trust. Clutch an alertness that focuses us on the promise of God's hope. During this Advent season our theme could be "Sing We Now of Christmas," what with our cantata next week. We could even base our Advent season based on our hymn number 237. We will be singing of redemption because it is one of the blessed ways to express our faith.

David N. Mosser, Salado UMC, Salado, Texas 76571