

Sunday, November 28, 2021 – “Tomorrow’s World”
– Bible Study & Reflection on Luke 21:25-36

Dear Members & Friends:

I invite you to read the following passages from Luke 21:25-36 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

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 does not 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.”

This Sunday, we begin the Church’s new liturgical year with the First Sunday of Advent. Welcome to Year C of the Revised Common Lectionary, the year when we travel through Luke’s Gospel. Luke, we will find, is a brilliant, detailed storyteller. Some of our favorite parables are found solely in Luke. Some of the most beloved elements of the Christmas story like the shepherds and angels, are Luke’s creations. And yet, Luke’s Gospel is more than good story telling. Luke is a preacher who uses a wide of array of literary devices to get across the sermon that Christ is the long-awaited fulfillment of the messianic hopes of Israel and all humanity.

After we’ve been in Mark’s cruciform, austere, sometimes chaotic, and violent world that heads Jesus and his disciples straight for the cross, Luke’s world seems much more kinder and gentler. In Luke, there are dinner parties, people go on journeys, and Jesus spends lots of time with his disciples, patiently teaching them, and some of the most dearly loved parables in the Christian Gospels.

Still, our first meeting with Luke, on this First Sunday of Advent, seems to be Luke in a very different, dark, stark, apocalyptic frame of mind. We’ll find little of Luke’s world affirming and positive in the depiction of this heaven and earthshaking age in this Sunday’s Gospel. This world is becoming unglued, destabilized, shaken. Jesus looks up into the sky and sees a dark horizon with storm clouds gathering. The weather is changing. There are cosmic signs, strange portents that hint that things are coming to an end. Look up in the sky with Jesus on the First Sunday of Advent, and you will see the “signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars.” The world is shifting on its axis, breaking apart in a time when “on earth whole countries will be in despair, afraid of the roar of the sea and the raging tides” (Luke 21:25b, *Good News Bible*).

This is the stock and trade of apocalyptic literature; talk about the end of the world. Apocalyptic doom and gloom sits uneasily with cheery mainline Protestant spirituality. It seems so strange, so somber, even violent. I suspect that most folks getting ready for Christmas are looking for a more uplifting, positive message than what Jesus is forecasting for the earth’s future fate.

Perhaps Luke's apocalyptic finale might give us a fresh peculiarly appropriate word for the present moment. After all, the purpose of apocalyptic literature was to give people suffering in their present crisis hope for a better future. Let's face it. We live in apocalyptic times. For nearly two years now, there has been a pandemic, a national reckoning with our past and present racism, political unrest and disturbance. In the most virulent days of the COVID-19 pandemic, some prophesied "the end of the world as we know it." Others said things like, "We have had epidemics and pandemics before; we will have them again. We've got to live into the 'new normal.'"

All of these events lead people to ask a fundamental question: What do these apocalyptic times mean? Endings? Destruction? Death?

And yet this Sunday's Gospel reminds us that the Advent proclamation in Luke is not only negative, frightening news. Things are ending so that newness might come forth. A snow storm is coming as we could see from the winter clouds, but we awoke to a beautiful winter-land world in the morning with glistening snow branches. See! A storm can have a good effect. With the dismantling of an old world may, by God's grace, be the birth of a new world.

Preacher Jesus says through the Gospel of preacher Luke that this time of rising and falling, of destruction and birth, is a time for disciples of Jesus to bear testimony. Jesus says, "Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." We are to proclaim in our words and actions that all of our times, particularly dark and frightening times, are in the hands of God. God is yet at work in history to bring all things to God's loving purposes. There is undeniable fearfulness in the signs of the times. Things are being transformed and some of that transformation may be painful. Yet, to those who have faith in a loving and resourceful God, there is also hope.

So amid dark portents, signs in the sun, moon, and stars, Jesus commands us to "raise your heads," and tells us to offer testimony that "the kingdom of God is near." It's a good time to preach and live out the gospel, a time to give testimony – Jesus Christ is a sign that God reigns, that the Creator will have the final word in creation, that something new is breaking in upon us, an advent that brings salvation. Tomorrow's world will be different than our current one, but it will be God's world nonetheless.

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Romans 15:13, *NRSV*).

Blessings,

Pastor Greg Rupright