

## Advent 1 – November 29, 2009 – Jeremiah 33: 14-16; Luke 21: 25-36

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. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see *the Son of Man coming in a cloud* with power and great glory.

Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near. Then he told them a parable: *Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.* 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. 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, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. 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."

### EMBRACE EXPECTANCY

*There will be signs – people will experience foreboding...* We look to the world around us – to the weather and nature, the powers that be, the people we love – we look to signs both cosmic and personal to help us prepare for whatever might be coming. While the signs will make people faint – even fall down – from terror, Jesus invites his followers – invites us – to stand up – to lift up our heads. Although various anxieties about what's happening will weigh people down and perhaps bow their heads, Jesus invites his disciples to lift up our heads so that we can be on the lookout for his return.

Today marks the beginning of Advent – a season of hopeful anticipation in which we eagerly await the coming of the Christ child in a manger. In Jesus' time, in the context of this passage from the Gospel of Luke, a different kind of waiting is going on. Jesus has foretold the destruction of the Temple and some have asked him when this will occur and what will indicate that it is about to happen. When Luke tells the story in this gospel it is the second coming of Christ that is anticipated with mixed emotions. In every time and circumstance we are looking for signs that will help us to understand – help us to prepare – help us to embrace that for which we hope.

Jesus tells of many signs that the people might expect including unnatural events and the resulting confusion among nations and people, not knowing what will happen next. He also indicates that the *Son of Man* – the ideal human – Christ – will come from heaven *in a cloud* with power to control events. Then *redemption*, God's action for salvation and wholeness, will be near.

The signs that Jesus talks about are mostly disturbing and a bit frightening. With the exception of the fig tree image which we will return to later, the signs evoke distress and panic – it is the natural response, yet Jesus tells his followers to view the signs with confident hope. While these signs will be so dramatic that they'll make people wonder what's happening, Jesus tells his followers that they can know what's going on. Jesus' followers, he says, can stand up and pay attention. After all, instead of the destruction that some think these cosmic signs signal, Jesus says they will point to the descent of the Son of Man from heaven. These signs invite us to a sense of wonderful expectancy, because they signal the advent of our redemption.

However, Jesus suggests that the wait for this descent may be long. We may have to stand on our tiptoes for a long time. So he warns against getting bogged down *with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life*. He warns us not to be weighed down with terror-induced indulgence and debilitating fear but to stand and look at the signs with the eager anticipation of children catching snowflakes on their tongues. A time of freedom is surely coming – redemption. Jesus wants his followers not to be preoccupied by the ordinary things that so often bother us. If, after all, we get caught up in those things, we can't be as watchful as he wants us to be. If, in fact, we become too diverted while waiting for Christ's return, it may sneak up on us in such a way that it becomes like a kind of trap.

One challenge of our faith – one of the tensions that Advent brings into clear relief – is that we are to see things differently than others might. People of faith interpret signs differently. God breaking into the world in the infant Jesus, is not an end in itself. It is not a romantic idea of warm fuzzy feelings. The vulnerable Christ is but the beginning of renewed hope – a sign of the world turned upside down – a glimpse of the kingdom promised.

One of the signs that Jesus points to as he tries to guide those seeking to prepare for and perhaps control events related to the destruction of the Temple is the image of the fig tree: *Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.* It is a sign based on the rhythms of the natural world – leaves appearing on seemingly dead trees – new green shoots strikingly bold on a barren landscape. Jesus indicates that they will see and recognize the sign – it will seem familiar to them – but it will come in its own time – they must wait.

We hear this passage today as the season of Advent begins and we remember that time is not ours to control – God's desire will be fulfilled in God's time. In Advent we learn, not to master time, but to submit ourselves to the flow of God's time – we can learn the spirituality of waiting – we can embrace Sabbath time.

One way to submit to Advent waiting is to stop and enjoy the day – to get out of the usual routine – to cease work and striving – to give up trying to be God – to let go of our possessions – to turn away from a culture that threatens to consume us – to resist being so *weighed down* with day-to-day earthy matters that we are unprepared for the final call – so burdened that we forget to hope.

Let's take a moment in this season of waiting to think about hope and to share our thoughts with those around us this morning. Where have you experienced hope lately? How have you experienced hope? What gives you hope?

In our Advent time of hope-filled waiting we look to those things we can cease doing as we get on with being God's people. We can experience what it is to be limited by time and nature as many of us have been during the past days of excessive rain. We can remember that Advent draws our attention to two biblical pregnancies – one is Mary's, an angel announces the inexplicable – a virgin shall bear a child. The other is the pregnancy of an old and barren woman, Elizabeth. These two women wait – and with all the mothers of the world, they teach us how to wait – how to embrace expectancy.

This is what we do in Advent, we pause. In that extended moment as we wait for what is to come we are invited to experience the wonder of what it is to fully stop for a time. The furnace stops blowing heated air, the fridge gives up its running, the tick tock of the clock ceases – there is a muffled hush like snow flakes falling in the dark and still of night. In that moment of bated breath – of letting go – of pregnant pause – we hear with new ears, see with new eyes – we know that Christ is with us and yet we wait for his coming again. **Amen.**