

Sermon on Luke 21:25-36
First Sunday in Advent, November 29, 2009
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

In true Minnesota Lutheran fashion, I will begin this sermon with a comment about the weather! This has been one of those years when the weather seems to have thrown the seasons out of whack. Remember how cool it was in late August for the State Fair? Nice for walking the fairgrounds, not too hot, but terrible for trying to go swimming or boating one more time – so we missed those end of summer activities. Then it became warm for the month of September – just in time for school to start, and go back to work! But it cooled off again in October, so that soccer moms and dads (not to mention players) froze outdoors at their children's soccer games, and we turned on the heat inside a bit early. Now it's the end of November, and the past few weeks have been unseasonably warm, so that we haven't yet gotten out our winter coats or seen a hint of snow. I remember Thanksgivings when it has been below zero, with a layer of snow on the ground (remember the Halloween blizzard of 1991?). So the leaves are long gone from the trees, the Thanksgiving holiday has come and gone, and we're getting ready for winter's snow. It's the First Sunday in Advent, after all. But just this past week as Kim and I left the house on another warm, sunny November morning, I saw something that totally surprised me. On the tips of the branches of our bare *azalea* plant near the front door were little buds, ready to burst forth with pink blossoms! Our early blooming springtime flowers are totally confused: because it's not a sign of spring – we're supposed to be moving into winter's cold! So sometimes even the plants confuse one season for another! And sometimes we're confused as well!

Today, on this first Sunday in Advent, we read from Luke's gospel how Jesus told his disciples about the signs of God's coming, as they stood outside the Temple of Jerusalem just before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus would share his Last Supper with his disciples. As they looked at how the Temple was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, Jesus remarked sadly how one day all these stones would come down, one upon the other – all would be thrown down. (Later the church remembered his words when the Romans besieged Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple four decades after Jesus had said them.)

His disciples asked him about this, and when all this would happen – and Jesus just warned them not to be fooled or led astray. For many would come and speak in his name, saying that they were he or that the time is near. Don't follow them, Jesus said. But after telling them about the terrible suffering that would surely come when the Roman armies besieged and took this great city, he began to share with them a new message of hope and promise that would follow. For one day there would also be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, which would

make many people on this earth shake with fear. And then they will all see the Son of Man appear, coming in the clouds with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, Jesus said, “stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

Now if this were a movie script being written for the masses who enjoy going to “disaster movies”, the people would be warned by some hero to run away and hide. Perhaps some hero would find a way to rally the people against some terrifying threat, to fight and win, saving the people from certain doom and everyone would live happily ever after. But this is no movie script! And we, the people of God, are not warned to run away, or rallied to fight. Instead we are invited to stand and raise our heads to see the redemption of God’s Son.

So what are the signs that this is about to happen? Some say the signs are already apparent, in the floods and other natural calamities that seem to occur with greater frequency in recent years. Some look at wars, and earthquakes, and famines, and say that the end is near – the last days are at hand! Jesus seems to agree, when he says the signs are like those buds that appear on a fig tree in the spring, to warn that summer is near. But then I think of those buds on my azalea plants outside my front door, which are so confused by the weather this year that they try to sprout and bloom in December, when winter is coming on! Could our confusion be so commonplace and expected? After all, Jesus said we do not know the day or the hour. Only God knows when all this will happen!

Our task is to be on guard, keep awake, and stay alert at all times, to pray for the strength to endure all that will face us, so that we may stand before the Son of Man. Jesus warns us not to be discouraged, or so weighed down with anxiety over what might happen to us in the future that we are caught unawares by the events of life. Keep the faith, trust in God, and wait for the Lord with hope and expectation. For “heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away!”

After all, what have we to be afraid of, really? Not from God, and the coming of our Lord. There may be plenty to fear on this earth, but what God brings is not judgment but hope and new promise for life everlasting! In the first lesson, the prophet Jeremiah introduces the promise of God’s Messiah coming into our world, six centuries before Jesus was born: *Behold the day are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: “The Lord is my righteousness.”*

Through the coming of Jesus into our world, and with his resurrection from the dead, we are inheritors of this same promise! In our baptism into Christ, you and I have died with him and been raised with him, we have been redeemed from death and the devil, and received the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation!

The truth of the matter is, you and I don't really know the trouble that we are in! Yes, we know that we are human, and thus mortal, and so we shall one day die. We know that we are vulnerable to all kinds of injury or disease, and before natural disasters we are quite helpless. But most of our day to day lives we live almost oblivious to our vulnerability, numb to our mortality. Poets may accuse us of dull, half-lived lives, merely existing when we are called to lives of rich abundance. We often walk blind to our neighbors' need, neglectful of our closest human relationships, hardly giving a thought to our debt to our loving, Creator God. What gets most of our attention is our endless quest for creature comforts and material gain. Can any of us really admit the truth of such an accusation?

It seems we need something dramatic to get our attention! Maybe that's what these scripture warnings of the end times are about – they certainly get our attention! We don't like hearing their message of devastation and destruction. But do you get the point? We're not in charge, and we're not in control of our lives, or our futures – for there are forces often beyond our control. And in the end, there is God (who is the beginning and the end!). There's a quote from writer Flannery O'Connor which says it well: "For the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind, you draw large and startling figures." That's especially true for us in America today, consumed as we are by our striving for material possessions and entertainment. These words speak to us, who are almost deaf to the words of love and grace spoken to us by our Father in heaven, and seemingly blind to the presence of the Lord in our world and in our lives. So Jesus says, "Wake up, stay alert, stand up, and raise your heads to the coming of God into your lives and your world. You and I can't go through life "sleep-walking" any longer! Because God is here, Christ has come and will come again, to bring you life and salvation!

Maybe all this talk of the "end of days" sounds too much like bad news – because we watch too many disaster movies! We imagine Christ's coming might be worse than all those special effects like those in *Earthquake* or *2012*. But maybe we should think of this as great poetry, vivid imagery that draws our attention and makes its point: that God is in charge and Christ will come again to bring new life to all the earth. Isn't that really *good news*? It should be – for it surely beats the alternative: that God is NOT in charge and Christ is NOT coming again! So listen for the hope that such words give us for the future, and be encouraged by the everlasting power and life-giving love of God! For knowing this truth allows you and me to look at life in a brand new way, as children of a gracious and all-powerful, loving God who gives us such an energizing view of the future. A future that includes you and me, along with every child of God, with a promise to live with our Lord Jesus in eternal joy and peace! Thanks be to God!