

First Sunday of Advent
December 2, 2018
Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church
Farmington, New Mexico

Luke 21:25-36 “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. **26** People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. **27** At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. **28** When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

29 He told them this parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees. **30** When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. **31** Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near.

32 “Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. **33** Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.

34 “Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you suddenly like a trap. **35** For it will come on all those who live on the face of the whole earth. **36** 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.”

“Hopeful Watchfulness”

I have to admit I don't really pay much attention to weather forecasts. At least, not lately. I know some of you are still helping with my transition to Northwest New Mexico by informing me it's usually colder than this at this time of year or we used to get a lot more snow years ago. But I have just kind of tuned out all the weather reports of huge snow storms in the Midwest and blizzards out East. It just seems like we can pick up on the rhythms of climate in our region. It might be noticeably colder when I get up in the morning or cloudier today than yesterday. But it doesn't really change my habits, how I dress or how I drive. Maybe just have a hat handy and a pair of gloves within reach just in case there is a dramatic shift in the meteorological conditions.

That's why I was caught off guard a couple weeks ago when I woke up to snow on a Monday morning. Maybe it wouldn't have made much of a difference if I had been glued to the evening news. Maybe they had no idea it was coming either. And even though it made for pretty landscapes and cancelation of school for the day, it wasn't much more than a mild surprise. Not being aware of the coming snow didn't make life miserable or pose any personal dangers.

Today Jesus wants us to pay attention. And what we see in Luke chapter 21 is that Jesus doesn't just ask us to tune in when we get a chance. Jesus calls his people to constant watchfulness. Jesus gives us these words to take away fear from our watchfulness and replace it with hope. Prepared by Jesus, we can be confident to live each day until his return in hopeful watchfulness.

These verses are interesting, because, at first glance, it looks like it could be 3 or 4 different sections stitched together. But the verses actually flow from the beginning to the end under that one useful heading of hopeful watchfulness. Jesus begins in verse 25 by pointing his hearers to the signs they should be watching for. Signs get our attention. But like the ones you see when driving on the highway, signs aren't done with their jobs once you see them. Signs point our attention to something else, to look around, to be aware. Watch out for curves or falling rocks or children walking to school or icy bridges.

Once we back up to the beginning of Luke chapter 21, we see Jesus is trying to prepare his disciples for what is about to happen. The disciples were part of the larger crowds gathering around Jesus after his headline-grabbing entrance into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. They were in the mood for glory. King Herod's remodeling project for the temple grounds were truly cause for awe. But Jesus interrupted their own hopes for the temple when he told them: **"the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down."** (Luke 21:6) Jesus immediately has their attention. They want to know more details. They want to know when.

Of course, Jesus isn't interested in filling in all the missing information or satisfying their curiosity. Jesus has a bigger purpose in mind. Jesus wants disciples to be watchful. That's the watchfulness of someone prepared for wildfires after building a house out in the woods rather than someone memorizing lines in preparation for an audition.

Some truly shocking things will take place. Those will be unmistakable. Skeptics, atheists, and believers alike won't be able to overlook them. Many times in the Bible prophecies smush together monumental acts of judgement from God in the short term with the ultimate judgment God will bring about at the end of time. Prophetic perspective is like looking at mountain ranges that look like they are inches apart and feet higher or shorter when you look at them from 100 miles away. Once you get closer, you can see those peaks differ in height by thousands of feet and are separated by dozens of miles or more.

This is where a second section comes in. But Jesus tells the parable to reinforce what he had just taught instead of adding a brand new thought. You can recognize when trees start to bud and blossom, the seasons are changing. So also Christians can pay attention to what is going on in our world and get ready. Jesus wants us to be aware of things changing in the world and realize God's kingdom is coming. See what's going on and know what is coming.

That's the exact opposite of ignoring the signs and going about our business as usual. We know how easy it is to feel like the coming of Jesus, all those signs actually happening are so far off in the distant future that they are almost irrelevant. It's a lot easier to just put our heads down and just focus on shopping and spending. Or we see how many special events and celebrations call for our attention. We hear plenty of messages that call to put our energy on meaningful experiences for ourselves and the people in our lives. And it's refreshing to have encouragement to live more generously and give to charities and think about people who don't have the same advantages and privileges we do.

As Christians we can recognize the importance of being on the lookout for the signs Jesus tells us about. And in principle we know it's a good idea to keep focused on the end, how everything in life, how the entire history of the world will turn out. Yet we would be foolish if we convince ourselves we aren't influenced by everything that is going on all around us. We involuntarily soak up the effects of living in a sinful world. We absorb the philosophies we hear all around us and get caught up in what consumes everyone else's routines. Like taking in air into our lungs the holiday optimism of our age becomes part of us.

Jesus issues instruction that works not just for those disciples gathered outside Jerusalem, but also for God's people gathered here today. He warns: **"Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you suddenly like a trap."** (Luke 21:34) Your heart can become overburdened with everything you carry around. You end up fatigued by everything that you are responsible for, both good and bad. Dissipation or carousing refers to a life that is wasted on self-indulgence. We can numb ourselves with alcohol and partying. But we can numb ourselves with all kinds of cares and anxieties that are just a product of living in this world. And deep down, on a heart level, we know the world's sense of optimism leads to emptiness. Yet the numbness we experience translates into an unwillingness to do anything too hard or to adjust our thinking in a way that is challenging. We are unwilling to say "no" to pet sins that come easiest to us and numb our lives the cold reality of God's judgment. We are unwilling to see fellow Christians as equals, or at least just as deserving of honesty and respect as we are when it's a lot easier just to criticize and pass judgment. We are unwilling to answer God's call to serve others or risk the embarrassment of sharing our faith with others. We'd rather stay comfortably numb.

So Jesus issues these warnings to give you hope instead of just simply optimism. He tells us to **"be careful"** and then **"be always on the watch."** (Luke 21:34,36) But the goal of this watchfulness is to find Jesus, to **"stand before the Son of Man."** (Luke 21:36) Jesus wants us to find our hope in him.

One interesting exercise in any home with children is to ask them what they want to be when they grow up. In our home one time the answer came back, 'A delivery man.' And to their perspective it makes sense. The deliver man brings packages that are exciting and fun. They bring joy. Just don't tell children they sometimes also bring bills. Hopeful watchfulness looks to Jesus. Watchfulness sees the willingness of Jesus to do everything necessary for our salvation rather than just what was easy. Jesus stood up to the accepted standards of his time to inconvenience himself for our eternal good. Jesus delivers his good news. Jesus brings us everything he came to do in our place. Jesus brings his sacrifice for sin, his forgiveness, and his peace.

That's why it's interesting the kind of reaction Jesus instructs after telling disciples about the signs that accompany judgment and destruction. Instead of telling us to run for safety or duck and cover, he says stand up straight. Jesus says: **"When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."** (Luke 21:28) Jesus doesn't just want you to pay attention so you are prepared. He

wants you to see he brings ultimate deliverance. We still live in this world now with its sinful influences. Jesus will come again to remove us from every sinful corruption surrounding us. We still struggle against the temptations surging from inside our hearts. Jesus will come back to give us hearts incapable of any evil or wrongdoing. We currently soak up the concerns and anxieties that come from living on this planet. When Jesus comes a second time we will be living in perfect bliss in his kingdom without any fear of pain or sadness or fear.

That gives hopeful watchfulness a unique sense of vigilance today. You can be vigilant if the authorities let you know there is an escaped convict roaming around in your neighborhood. Or you can be vigilant when rumors spread that some good samaritan is handing out \$100 bills in your area. God's people possess an eagerness for the coming of Jesus. We can't wait until he returns and our excitement is infectious.

As as we watch in hope, Jesus gives us a very powerful way to do it. He promises: **"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away."** (Luke 21:33) Every promise Jesus makes is valid. None of them are obsolete. His words stand for eternity. Our world wants to be optimistic about what human potential can unleash on our society. Jesus wants us to find his power in his Word. The signs in the natural world remind us we can't think of our lives as business as usual. The signs drive us to Scripture for God's guidance. The shopping and spending that drives our anxiety helps us focus instead on the peace and comfort we get when we gather with fellow Christians around the Word and Sacraments. The experiences and events that fill our schedules teach us to take more concerted efforts to spend more time in prayer with the Lord. Look to God's Word the way kids look to the front porch to see if a package has been delivered. Look to God's promises that center us on his grace to us in Christ the way grandchildren run to the front door hoping grandma and grandpa have arrived.

God has a way of giving us exactly what we need. The disciples gathered around Jesus admiring the temple needed the same wake up call we need. We don't find our hope in the things of this world. Not even in the best blessings we receive from God's hand. Like getting an accurate and timely weather forecast, God gets us ready. God wants you to be prepared for the sometimes harsh realities we will face in this world. He gives us signs to prepare us. And so we watch. And as we watch, we hope. We hope focused on Jesus. Amen.