

Sunday, December 4, 2022 – Advent II (Populus Zion)

Luke 21:25-36 (ESV) – “Signs of the End Times”

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

“²⁵ And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, ²⁶ people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ²⁷ And 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, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” ²⁹ And he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. ³⁰ As soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the 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 say to you, this generation will not pass away until all has taken place. ³³ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. ³⁴ “But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap. ³⁵ For it will come upon all who dwell on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶ But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

How do we know that Christmas is coming? Those observant among us would notice that the decorations are already up in the church, just straining at the bit for the joyous day of the Nativity of our Lord to be upon us. They’re beautiful, they’re different, and they’re very descriptive. I don’t think that anyone would confuse them with the pennants and flags of the Fourth of July, the commemoration of

our nation's independence! Along with this, you'd have to be pretty much missing everything to note that the days are growing shorter. Less than 12 hours of daylight by the time we approach the Winter Solstice on December 21st is close to the date of Christmas. It's no accident that the church has celebrated the birth of the Light of the World, Jesus Christ, in opposition to the pagan celebration of the Winter Solstice, ever since the Early Church days. We aren't sure exactly when His birth was on the calendar, but we do know the date of the Epiphany of our Lord, and why the primacy of Christmas overtook the Epiphany is a subject for another sermon! Additionally, you notice that whenever you go to a store or a restaurant this time of year, you're soothed (or maybe assaulted, depending on the selection) with Christmas music. This begins subtly sometime in November and grows to a fevered pitch after Thanksgiving. Even on the radio, some of the stations make a complete changeover, at least for a short time, to "holiday music", whether or not it has any bearing on Christian Christmas or not. At least the radio station playing in my study has done this starting this week. So, the signs are there.

Yet, even though few of them miss the signs that Christmas is coming, it instills fear for some, apprehension for others, and joy and gladness for most of us. Fear on the part of parents that don't have the budget to buy the latest gadgets and doodads for the kids. Apprehension and sadness on the part of those who don't have their loved ones with them for the first time this Christmas, and all the troubled memories that this elicits. Joy and gladness for those of us who realize that this commemoration marks the time when God came to us when we could not come to Him, and dwelled among us, all on the way to His cross and Passion, His death and resurrection, for each and every one of us. The signs lead to different reactions, depending on one's circumstances and mindset.

Now, our text talks about different signs than those that mark our secular and religious celebration of Christmas that is coming up in just a few short weeks. St. Luke speaks of the signs of the coming of the fulfillment of the age, the second coming of the Christ, at the Last Day, the end of the world. There will be some frightful things that occur; many will be shaken to their very core by the signs

that are coming soon. Like the coming of Christmas, few if any of us will miss that these signs are occurring. However, if we aren't trained and reminded of what they're going to look like, we're apt to dismiss them as being caused by "global warming", or "climate change", or the preferred moniker of the age. We need to be familiar with the Scriptures to know that these things mark the coming of Christ sooner rather than later. True, we don't have a step-by-step instruction book, that tells us exactly when He's coming. But we know that when these natural disasters, these human actions, take place, we need to be joyful, for we know what is ultimately coming – the ushering in of God's kingdom of heaven, which will be perfect and pain-free, and where we will be without even the desire to sin anymore. So, cheer up! Even though it sounds like we're in for a lot of trouble, the truth is that it's just a trifle compared to the glories that God is about to reveal for us, totally because of His love and His mercy.

What are some of the signs that we should be anticipating, looking for, and waiting with bated breath for? Signs in the sun, moon and stars. Remember a few years ago – with the complete solar eclipse – there was such a buildup to get a ring-side seat to watch it? Some folks even traveled to the West Coast, and made reservations in farm fields months in advance, to see the total covering of the sun in broad daylight. There was no price too great for the farmers to charge – just the day before, it was agricultural land, worth only what a crop growing on it could produce. But, the day of the eclipse, it was worth thousands of dollars to folks that couldn't have cared less before about it. If I remember correctly, there were a lot of folks that were disappointed on the day of the eclipse, too – apparently it was too cloudy to see much of anything, at least in most of North America

This shows the folly of noticing that such things in the sky are happening, and yet not realizing that they are for a reason – to remind us that Jesus' second coming is nearer now than when we first believed, to paraphrase Paul in Romans. On the Last Day, we won't have to travel to some far-off part of the world to see the signs marking the day of our Lord's coming – rather, every eye will see, every knee will bend, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Important to note: all will know on the Last Day that what's been promised for centuries is occurring. But there will be a difference between those who rejoice (believers – that they're finally receiving the promised inheritance in heaven) and those who justly fear and tremble in their boots (they've persistently not believed in Christ, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world). That's where the separation, the cleaving, the difference will be – in the reaction of folks on the Last Day, not on who will see it and who will not

The roaring of the sea, and the waves. One of the predictions of the scientists has been that the world will warm up so much that the polar ice caps will melt, and any city that's within about 500 miles of the coastline will be destroyed, drowned, buried under dozens of feet of water. That sounds an awful lot like a roaring sea, and waves that are higher than we can measure. Those who count on this world existing forever and having to make contingency plans for whatever "Mother Nature" does, rightly will fear this. But, for those who believe in God's provision and love and care, we fear nothing that this world can throw at us. Just as in the days of Noah, God preserved those who had faith in Him to provide and protect. "Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord" – not that there was anything special about Noah, or that he was somehow better than anyone else. Rather, he had been given faith in Christ, and didn't reject it. Noah believed that God would provide for him and his family, and God did so. He directed Noah to make provisions for a great flood, and he and his family never were drowned in the sea. We can also take comfort in God's promise in the rainbow – that He will never again destroy the entire earth by a flood – He might allow floods to come again, but not in the destruction that happened in Noah's time

Just like Jesus, Who walked on the water of the Sea of Galilee, He has all the power over His creation. That's why when He said to the waves, "Be still," they actually did. Try this sometime – your word and mine isn't creative and doesn't automatically do what we say. You can curse the darkness, or order the snow to stop piling up, but it doesn't usually listen! The only One that has power over the

wind and waves is God Himself, and He has promised that He will not destroy us, but will save us and preserve us to Himself

Then there's Jesus' example of the fig tree – what a great illustration for us to remember. We are given some knowledge into what to look for to determine that Christ's second coming is near. When the leaves are full, and the tree is in bloom, that's when you go looking for figs. When it is not in bloom, then you can look all you want, but you probably aren't going to find many figs on the tree. These natural cycles were created by God, so that we could learn from them, capitalize on them – just like the dominion that we were granted over all His creation by God when He made us

Throughout the Scriptures, in the latter part of Matthew and Luke's Gospels, in the book of Daniel, and especially in John's book of Revelation, we are given some ways to predict, to know, that Christ is coming again soon. These are given not so that we can assign a date, and then live in bliss until the day before, and then frantically put things in order. NO! These are given so that we will not lose heart, that we will not forget the promises that God has given us to come again. He hasn't forgotten about us; rather, He delays His coming until His time is right – when the greatest number of people will have repented and believed the Good News. If we were given a date and a time for His return, we wouldn't handle it right – we'd delay our preparation, when that preparation is the healthiest thing for us – to live in daily repentance and forgiveness, to be ready at any time for His Second Coming, and not cling to the things of this sinful world.

These are given so that we will not lose heart, when things get tough, when it seems like the world is turning against us, when we think that we won't have the strength to get through these troubled times. Jesus (and His appointed writers) remind us that things will be tough, but He will not allow those who are His elect, those who do not abandon faith in Him, to be separated from Him. Even though we will be pressed on all sides to echo Job's wife, who told him to "curse God and die" in order

to get along better with those who would rob us of faith and Godly living, we will not do so, because we already know that this is coming! We will be enabled to not cower in fear, but rather rejoice, when these horrible things happen, because we know that He is coming soon.

That's what we celebrate during this Advent season – that Jesus is coming – and coming soon. We tend to be earthly-focused and point to the fact that Jesus came as a baby in a manger, and we need to get ready to celebrate His birth in just a few short weeks. This is not wrong, and in fact, this is in keeping with the season of the church year that we're being prepared to celebrate. But, the Early Church, in its great wisdom in being closer to the direct teaching of Jesus, knew that it was more about another coming – Jesus' second coming at the end of time. That's much more important than His incarnation, although His coming as a baby in a manger was very important. The fact that He's coming again at the end of time is the most important waiting that we'll ever do – because it's the fulfillment of His plan and purpose – to take us to Himself at the end of time, to restore us to the perfection that He created us to have, to remove us from this veil of tears to Himself in heaven.

We're given the signs in Scripture that we need to know – so that we can be reassured, so that we can have some assurance that His Word is true, so that we can be ready at any moment for Him to come back. Rest assured, however, that being ready for His coming doesn't involve preparation on our part – otherwise, it would be hopeless. The Holy Spirit prepares our hearts and souls with saving faith, instilled in us at our Baptism, and continually increased and strengthened by His Means of Grace, in continued and regular use of His Word and Sacraments. As we prepare for the coming of Christmas, let us not forget that this is not the only thing we're looking forward to – our salvation (the coming of the Last Day) is nearer now than when we first believed, as we heard in the Epistle reading from Paul's letter to the Roman Christians last week. Thanks be to God for saving us from our many sins, and for doing everything for our salvation. Amen.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ

Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Amen.