

“Sit Up Straight”

Luke 21:25-36

When you read our Gospel lesson for today, it probably sounds a lot like what we read last week. It should. This is Luke’s account of the same event. Jesus is speaking to His disciples about the end times. As we read our lessons appointed for this first Sunday in Advent, other than in Jeremiah where the Lord said: “I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David” – a clear prophecy of the coming of Christ – other than that one verse, the lessons today don’t sound like what we would expect from Advent texts. Where are Mary and Joseph, Elizabeth, Zechariah, and John the Baptist? What are all of these “end of the world” prophecies doing in the weeks leading up to Christmas?

We just finished the last three weeks of the church year when we talk about the coming of Christ on the Last Day. Last week we celebrated the Final Sunday of the Church Year with Mark’s account of this same lecture from Jesus. This is the first Sunday of Advent. This is the new church year. Aren’t we supposed to be talking about the time leading up to the first coming of Christ?

The weeks of Advent leading up to Christmas do symbolize the years before the coming of Christ. Through prophecy and the revelation of God’s Word, the Old Testament people were continually enlightened as to what God meant when He promised Adam and Eve that He would send His

Seed to crush the head of Satan [Gen. 3:15].

And we celebrate this increasing revelation through the lighting of the Advent wreath. The lighting of the candles symbolizes the age before God's promise was fulfilled with the birth of Christ in Bethlehem. The Old Testament age was a time when the light of prophecy concerning the Messiah became brighter and brighter until He Himself came and said: "I am the light of the world."

The Advent season is a time of preparing. But just as the ancient people were to prepare and be ready for the coming of the Christ-child, so too, we are now called to be prepared for the coming of Christ on the Last Day.

During this Advent season we are to make preparations for both comings of Christ. We will look back at the Old Testament people to whom God continually revealed His promise – leading up to John the Baptist and his miraculous birth and ministry which preceded Christ's miraculous birth and ministry. But we also remain continually watchful for that Last Day, so that, as the Lord said: "that day will not come upon you suddenly like a trap."

As we prepare for that Last Day, Jesus gives us a series of instructions. The Lord says, "**Straighten up.**" When I hear this, I think of when we took the girls to Disney World and ate supper in Cinderella's Castle. I was leaning over telling them something and the Fairy God-Mother came by, tapped me on the shoulder, and said, "Sit up straight."

It kind of startled me – scared me even. Jesus says, when you see the signs of the coming of the Son of Man, there will be reasons for real fear and trembling for the unbelievers, but for the faithful, there is Good News on the horizon. There will be no need to stoop or cower in fear. "Straighten

up and **raise up** your heads.” “Lift up your heads, ye mighty gates.” “Look up” and see the Christ who brings the glory of the eternal kingdom. Don’t be like the pagans who fear the end. Raise up your heads! Look up! Your redemption is drawing near.

He then gives us a metaphor for how to recognize the end. “**Look** at the fig tree, and all the trees.” Jesus tells His disciples that just as you have been taught what you need to know in order to recognize the coming of the seasons of the year, so too, I have taught you what you need to know in order to recognize the coming of the end of the age.

The signs will be obvious. You don’t need to seek out the teachings of Nostradamus, or the doomsday Millennialists. Remember how accurate the Mayan calendar was. Don’t listen to anyone on the Internet or television who claim to know when the end is near. (They have been wrong every time. And as we heard last week, only the Father knows.)

The signs will be as obvious as the change of the leaves marking the seasons. Some of the signs have been appearing since the days of the apostles. War, earthquakes, famine, disease. Yet, there are signs that will not appear until just before Christ arrives. Therefore, for most people, Christ will come as a thief in the night, because most people have not listened to His teaching, they will be unprepared, and many will mock God’s people for believing such foolishness. We see this all around us.

Therefore, Jesus encourages you to remain confident. He says: “when you see these things happening, **know** that the kingdom of God is near.”

And because it is near, “**be careful**” and “**watch**.” We are to be careful not to grow tired of waiting and get bogged down with worrying about the anxieties of life, or assume that Christ is not going to return for a long

time, so we go off and do as we please.

And we are to watch and be on the guard at all times, even if all things seem safe at the time. From our personal perspective, this age can end at any time even if none of these signs occur, because we do not know on what day, or at what hour the Lord is going to demand our life from us. Judgment Day could be upon any of us at any time.

But as Christ said, “straighten up...lift up your heads.” This is a good thing that this life will end. There is no need to fear your death or the coming of the end of the age. We are not like this faithless generation who metaphorically speaking will never pass away. We will always be confronted with a continual line of unbelievers until all these things that Christ has foretold will happen. But then this faithless generation will certainly pass away. They will fear a great fear, and they will die an eternal death.

But until that Day, we are called to keep our heads up, to look for the signs around us, to be careful not to lose sight of Christ amid the worries of the world, to be always watching and praying so as not to fall into temptation, and finally, Christ assures us that amid all of these things we can remain unwavering in our confidence and “know that the kingdom of God is near.”

Just as we know that these weeks of Advent will soon lead us to the coming of Christ at Christmas, so too, we know that we are living in the greater Advent season that will soon lead us to the coming of Christ on that Last Day. As I said before, this is a good thing. This is not to be feared. Through the presence of God’s Holy Spirit in our lives, we can face the end of the world or the end of our life with unwavering confidence and heads lifted high knowing that, as Christ says, “your redemption is drawing near.” Amen.