



“Watch Closely”
Scripture – Luke 21:25-36
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, December 2, 2018

Black Friday was the starting gun signaling the beginning of the Christmas season. I could turn cynical and admonish you not to charge your credit card to the max on gifts for people who already have more than they need. You will be embarrassed when the present you give them for Christmas ends up in next year’s Westminster Bazaar!

I could wag my finger and remind you not to forget that Christmas is the time we celebrate the birth of Jesus, not simply an excuse to go on a spending orgy. But, I’m going to spare you. Why?

For one, I would be as successful as attempting to be heard while speaking into the face of a hurricane. There are so many voices shouting “Christmas is coming!” that a counter voice would be, at best, a whimper. But that’s not the main reason I will not try to slow the momentum of the season by shouting, “Wait! Not yet! First Advent, then Christmas.”

The main reason is – I love the Christmas season. In our age of egoism, even some of the most self-centered think about doing something kind for others – and not simply buying a gift for someone who does not need a thing. Some people who never give a dime to charity open their wallets in December to bring some holiday cheer to those who need it most.

The Christmas season has a way of softening even some of the hardest hearts among us, the season reminds people that “peace on earth” is a worthy goal, and more than any other time of the year, hope is in the air.

I know that Christmas can also be very sad for some. This may be the first Christmas that a loved one will not be here to celebrate it with us. For others it dredges up memories of past Christmas disappointments. Yet, overall, the music, the lights, the gift-giving, the extra efforts to bring joy to those down on their luck, make it a promising time of the year. And I pray that those whose celebration is dampened by loss will remember the main thrust of Christmas – that God is with us; *especially* when life is unkind.

In the church, we have four Sundays of Advent prior to our celebration of Christmas. These Sundays remind us of the need to prepare for the celebration of the birth of Jesus, to set the stage for the light that shines in the darkness. However, I don’t see the need to choose between Advent and Christmas. During December, the two intertwine like braids in a young girl’s hair.

This morning we are focused on an Advent scripture reading, but this afternoon Camilla and I will decorate our tree and string lights for this week's Christmas party for our wonderful church staff. We are singing Advent hymns in worship, while bringing in food and star gifts to pack our Christmas boxes. We will definitely lose something vital if we jettison Advent, but having Christmas moving alongside on a parallel track will not lead to a train wreck.

So, feel free to watch all of your favorite Christmas movies from now until Christmas. Just do not expect to find a reading of today's lectionary passage on the Hallmark channel.

Luke writes: *"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."* (Luke 21:25-26)

It is a first century apocalyptic vision of all hell breaking loose. Yet, it is strangely similar to today's headlines. Tens of thousands have died in the civil war in Yemen, and if the fighting does not stop, millions could die from the world's worst famine in more than 100 years. Eleven people were killed and seven were injured in a mass shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, mail bombs were sent to critics of the president, the opioid crisis claims lives daily, suicides are on the rise, and the other day, Russian border guards opened fire on three Ukrainian vessels, raising the prospect of a full-scale military confrontation.

"There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among the nations."

Today's passage was written 2,000 years ago, but could be mistaken for today's news. Why so much anger and corruption and violence? Where is our world headed? Our readings for the first Sunday in Advent come not from the days preceding the *birth* of Jesus, but rather from a few days prior to his *death*. They served as words of warning to the first followers of Jesus because their world was collapsing.

Our gospel writer penned these words around the year 85. These early Christians had witnessed the ruthless power of the occupying Romans. Caesar's armies had recently destroyed the temple in Jerusalem, killed scores of citizens and left the Holy City in ruins. Add to that the persecution of Christians, and it is hardly any wonder that the early followers of Jesus feared their world was on the verge of catastrophe. Their attempts to describe it strained the boundaries of human thought, so they employed hyperbolic language and mysterious figures of speech to capture their fear that the end was near.

Yet, the writer also reminded them of the words of Jesus that when it appears that death and darkness will win the day, watch closely for the signs of new life. Look at a fig tree. When they sprout leaves, you know that summer is coming. So also, when you see death appearing to win the day, know that the kingdom of God is hovering nearby.

Without Advent, Christmas can be an escape from the real world. Advent keeps us honest by reminding us that although we are preparing to celebrate the light shining in the darkness, the darkness refuses to flee. Left only to ourselves, we would surrender to despair; waiting for God to unilaterally set everything straight, we might turn cynical; but trusting God to guide us to a better day generates hope.

Like a river that is constantly flowing past us, the present is constantly fading into the past. Each moment can be a repeat of the past or it can be a new beginning. We do not begin each day with an absolutely clean slate because yesterday influences today. But the past does not chisel into granite what tomorrow will bring. Each day can be reshaped into something new.

Much of what we experience is determined by our perspective. How we approach the world plays a major role in what happens to us. Most of the time we live only on the surface of our lives. We act and react according to our habits and our current opinions, and we model what we see in others. If we are confident about our abilities, we rely on our strengths to handle what life brings us. If we are also aware of our frailties and our limits, we realize that our own strength and our own wisdom and our own courage are not always enough. We also need to tap into our soul which is our conduit to the Soul of the Universe. When we tap into our soul – which is our lifeline to God – we discover the true source of courage. God rekindles our courage by assuring us that God is with us always – in this life and the next. And it is courage that kindles hope. Courage can tap into the heart of fear and turn it into action.¹

John O'Donohue wrote, "If you never think of your soul but confine it to some vague region of spiritual fantasy, you squander an infinite energy at the heart of your life. Once you awaken to your soul, you know that you are no longer alone; nor are you at the mercy of your own frailty and limitation. Awakening to your soul, you begin to learn another way of being in the world. The old barriers no longer confine you, the old wounds no longer name you, and the old fears no longer claim you."²

Rachel Naomi Remen recently spoke to Krista Tippett on the radio program, *On Being*. Dr. Remen told the story of her grandmother who was married to a Rabbi and grew up in Russia. She and her husband were quite poor, and there was never enough food, so her grandmother was accustomed to making things stretch as far as possible. Later in life, they moved to this country, and because she had always been hungry in Russia, once they moved here, her refrigerator was always packed with food. In fact, every nook and cranny in her kitchen was full to the brim. And the family story was that if someone opened the door of the refrigerator without caution, an egg might fall out and break on the kitchen floor. Her grandmother's response to these accidents was always the same. She would look at the broken egg and exclaim, 'Aha. Today, we will have a sponge cake!'³

Life has its share of disappointment and heartache, but if we trust God to guide us to a better day, we find the courage to face whatever life throws us and the determination to redeem it the best we can. Left to ourselves we would be overwhelmed, but partnering with God, we can become resolute in nudging our world closer to God's kingdom.

NOTES

1. John O'Donohue, *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace*, (Harper Perennial, 2003), p. 6.
2. John O'Donohue, *To Bless the Space Between Us*, (New York: Doubleday, 2008), p. 206.
3. Rachel Naomi Remen, "The Difference between Fixing and Healing," *OnBeing.org*, November 22, 2018.

Prayers of the People – Sudie Niesen Thompson

Eternal God — In the beginning, when darkness covered the face of the deep, you spoke and light illumined our world. You breathed life into every living thing and called us to follow, so that our light might break forth like the dawn. But we turned away, letting the shadow of sin overwhelm us.

Ever faithful, you sent messengers to us, crying out in love and hope, "Return!" We did not recognize them or listen to their words. So, turning to the angels, you said, "Watch!" as you sent Jesus to draw us into your embrace.

In him, your Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. In him, you came to proclaim justice, to heal the sick, to feast with the outcast, to love radically. In him you conquered death, and opened the way to eternal life. Glory to you in the highest!

As we gather at this table, we remember all you have done for us since the foundation of the world. With thanksgiving, we take this bread and this cup and proclaim the death and resurrection of our Lord, even as we yearn for the day when you will come again to make all things new.

God With Us — In this season, you give us light that proclaims *peace*. So — knowing you come as the Prince of Peace — we pray for the places plagued by violence. You give us light that proclaims *hope*. So — trusting in your presence among us— we pray for those who dwell in darkness and despair. You give us light that proclaims *love*. So we pray that all may know your compassionate heart that summons us to this table. You give us light that proclaims *joy*. So we pray that this table reminds all your children of the feast that is to come, when we will sit at your table in glory.

Generous God — As we share the feast you have prepared, send your Spirit upon us. Enter this space, that all things ordinary might be used for your extraordinary purposes. As you fill us with this bread and this cup, fill us with your peace, hope, love, and joy, that we might go out to proclaim your good news to a weary and wounded world. We lift this prayer to you, in the name of the one who comes, and join our voices to offer the words he taught us:

Our Father, who art in Heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.