

Luke 21, Advent 1

Every so often, I have to trot out the fact that Old Lutheran—maker of sometimes cheesy/ sometimes meaningful Lutheran identity merch—the Old Lutheran company once upon a time used to hawk gym shorts with the words “Left Behind” emblazoned artfully on the left rear.

This is of course a snarky reference to the wildly popular Tim LaHaye series, which predicts that the End Times are upon us and we should be afraid, lest the Good People in God’s creation are vacuumed up into a heavenly Rapture, and all the rest of us are Left Behind.

My purpose isn’t to make fun of anyone’s belief system. I will say that the idea of rapture was invented less than 200 years ago by a preacher named John Nelson Darby. It is not, therefore, an inevitable or slam dunk interpretation of the book of Revelation. In fact the most salient interpretation of Revelation is as a political allegory aimed specifically at the Roman Empire in the years after the Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem. If there is a predictive quality here, it was meant to give hope and comfort to those then being squashed under the Empire’s chariot wheel, and now by reference to anyone living in oppression. The death-dealing forces that are at work now, will not be at work always.¹

So that gives you some context and maybe some distance on the cultural inheritance of the End Times. But it’s still a little jarring, as we move into Advent, Year C, and the Gospel of Luke, to hear Jesus say: “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.” I’m guessing anyone who lives this close to Lake Superior doesn’t need any more of a visual than that. And then further: “People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.” Merry fa-la-la-la Christmas.

Maybe you think it’s weird that we begin our church year with Advent rather than, say, at Easter, or Epiphany. In the custom of a lot of free church and evangelical communities, Advent hardly registers next to the

¹ For more information about all this, I’d point you in the direction of Barbara Rossing’s excellent book, *The Rapture Exposed: the Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation*, or the PBS Frontline series that aired some years back: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/apocalypse/revelation/white.html>

Main Event, aka the birth of Jesus. But in our tradition, the church year begins in the shadows of despair and unrest, suffering and brokenness.

True, we hold this in one hand while we hold Christmas and the imminent incarnation of Jesus in the other. Christmas will be here in 23 days; if we don't *know* we have certainly *heard* that salvation is near. But there's a danger that we skip directly to the soft-focus manger scene and the photogenic baby, the lights and the phantasmagoria of parties and gifts, without pausing to acknowledge with our whole being how desperately we need this intervention.

It's hard not to notice, for example, the distress among nations. We look with doubt and fear at Israel and Iran and Gaza, Ukraine and Russia, and conflicts elsewhere that scarcely even raise eyebrows in the U.S., although they are dire to the people who live them: Syria, Mali, Yemen, Sudan, Somalia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and so forth.

And in our confession this morning, we said together as a community, "We grow fearful. We cling to false comforts. We have turned away from our neighbors. We have trusted false promises." We undoubtedly have, or at least I do, our own lists of faults and missed opportunities.

But it is exactly here, in the mess and the white-knuckle uncertainty of our lives that grace arrives. It is exactly here, in God's perfect church of imperfect people, that we come together in the shortening days to light candles of hope, peace, joy, and love. It is exactly the story we tell of God incarnate in a hay mow that shows us that salvation can happen in the least likely places to the least likely of people.

And Jesus' discourse here, his final teaching before being overtaken by the Passion, is ultimately a word of hope, emphatic hope. A catchphrase in recent Roman Catholic teaching declares Christ comes in *history*, *mystery*, and *majesty*. Jesus' assertion that the Son of Man is coming "in a cloud with power and great glory" connects us back to last week's idea of Christ as King. That's the *majesty* part. He makes a claim that all things—evil things, irksome things, even those beautiful things we love—will pass away. But God's promise will not pass away.

The *history* part encapsulates our profession that Jesus the Human Being was born and lived among us as Love personified. This inbreaking of God

into the ordinary affairs of people is our surety that our Creator is not indifferent to our needs but actively involved in our deliverance. Jesus says, “Stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” If you can visualize standing with your head raised—that is a posture of attention and also of hope; whatever our struggles, we are not bowed down, because we have this hope as beloved children of God.

And then finally we accept the *mystery* that Christ is still being born today. Far from a dusty memory of bygone days, our reality is that wherever there is unrest or need of peace in the world, Christ is coming soon. Wherever people suffer unjustly or powers are misused, “redemption come near means those powers don’t get to do that anymore.”² The kingdom of God is stirring and will not rest until matters are put right.

“We plead: come to us.
Bring your mercy to birth in us.”

“Be on your guard,” Jesus says, meaning don’t miss this opportunity to be amazed. Look up from your worries once in a while to see what God is up to. Be attentive to the signs that the beginning is near.

Amid the snow and dark days, we read Jesus’ parable of fig leaves unfurling from the bud: “As soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near.” The life force that sends sap into green shoots and draws sunlight into sugars is unstoppable, more unstoppable than suffering. Summer always does come. The kingdom of God is already near.

² Karoline Lewis, *Sermon Brainwave* for Dec. 1, 2024.