

“Stand Up and Raise Your Heads”

Advent I: Sermon Text: Luke 21:25-36

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Luke is the third Gospel in the New Testament. Its author, traditionally Luke the physician who accompanied Paul on some of his missionary journeys, draws on three sources: Mark (by way of Matthew), a collection of sayings (known as “Q” for Quelle or “sayings”) and Luke’s own sources. Luke emphasizes God’s love for the poor, the disadvantaged, minorities, outcasts, sinners, and lepers. Women are more visible in Luke than in the other Gospels. Luke never uses Semitic words; this is one argument for supposing that Luke wrote primarily for Gentiles.

Our reading this morning is part of Jesus’ answer to the question: “At the destruction of the Temple, what signs indicate when this is about to happen?” People expected calamities at the end of the age, but Jesus tells us that he—the Son of Man—will then come from heaven. Hear the day’s text for Advent I:

25 “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. 26 People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. 27 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, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

29 Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; 30 as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that 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 tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. 33 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

34 “Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, 35 like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. 36 Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man” (Luke 21:25-36).

Jesus has forecast the Temple’s destruction (v. 6). Some asked Jesus when this will occur and what indicates that it is about to happen (v. 7). Given that “all the people were spellbound by what they heard” (19:48) and that the religious authorities “kept looking for a way to kill him” (19:47), the destruction must have had a spiritual meaning. Jesus tells of events commonly expected at the end of the era, and adds some which are specifically Christian. First, religious and civil authorities will persecute Christians (v. 12). Then, there will be “wars and insurrections,” but “the end will not follow immediately” as Jesus’ hearers expected. Disastrous natural phenomena will occur (v. 11), then armies will surround Jerusalem (v. 20) and the city will fall: either physically or spiritually. Again, another delay: the killing and deportation of citizens continues “until the time of the Gentiles is fulfilled.”

Jesus then foretells of unnatural events (“signs . . .”) and the resulting confusion among nations and people, not knowing what will happen next. But the “Son of Man” (v. 27), the ideal human, Christ, comes from heaven (“in a cloud”) with power to control events. Then

“redemption” (v. 23), God’s acts of freeing his chosen people, will be nearby. Just as the leafing of trees shows that “summer . . . is near” (v. 30), so the occurrence of all these events will show that “the kingdom of God is near.” This time will be obvious to the faithful. Despite the delay, the era will end before all those alive now have died (v. 32). Jesus’ “words” are even more eternal than creation. Finally, Jesus advises vigilance: do not be so “weighed down” (v. 34) with day-to-day earthly matters that you are unprepared for the final call (“that day”). Pray that God may give you the strength to resist all evils, so that you may “stand before” Christ, and deemed worthy of him (v. 36). **What can all this possibly mean for people today?**

I suggest we concentrate on verse 28: *“Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”* Verse 28 uses a word that means “redemption.” The Greek word is *apolytroisis*. Luke also uses this word at 2:38 when he writes about Anna’s temple visit: “. . . she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” (Luke 2:38). New Testament epistles use redemption often (see: Ephesians 1:7, 14; 4:30; Romans 3:24; 8:23; 1 Corinthians 1:30; Colossians 1:14). *Apolytroisis* means buying back. It is rooted in the Old Testament idea of redemption, God’s powerful act of freeing his people in need.

Our culture has sold Christians a bill of goods about Christmas. Our culture has managed to re-interpret the Christ-event we celebrate at Christmas into something else. We do not celebrate Christmas as a holy-day anymore. Christmas has morphed into something else. The authentic advent of Christ gives hope to an otherwise hopeless world—a hope we cannot give ourselves. It is only a hope that God can give us from beyond us. This is what I mean when I say culture has sold us a bill of goods.

Nike had a television commercial for hiking shoes that the company shot in Kenya using Samburu tribesmen. The camera closes in on one tribesman who speaks, in his native Maa. As he speaks, the Nike slogan "Just do it" appears on the screen.

Lee Cronk, an anthropologist at the University of Cincinnati, says the Kenyan is really saying, "I don't want these. Give me big shoes." Says Nike's Elizabeth Dolan, "We thought nobody in America would know what the tribesman said."

This is a modern parable of what Christmas has become for us in our modern world. "Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." This suggestion by Jesus flies in the face of every natural instinct we all have and instincts of those to whom Jesus spoke. When trouble comes in the form of armies, natural disasters and the like, our first inclination is to duck, get down, and cover our heads. When the day of judgment comes, as described in the book of Revelation, we see this scenario: "Then the kings of the earth and the magnates and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb' " (Revelation 6:15-16).

Yet notice what Jesus suggests: stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near. This is the true meaning of Christmas and the Advent that precedes it. We cannot save ourselves; but we can trust in the One who can save us or redeem us.

I close with a story I used about 2 ½ years ago during Confirmation Sunday. This is an Ernest Campbell story of risky redemption in action. A few days after Lee Oswald shot John F. Kennedy, as Campbell tells it, a member of the church I was serving in Ann Arbor, MI called and

suggested that the one thing we might do to partially redeem the tragedy would be to provide Marina Oswald with an opportunity to improve her English. Mrs. Oswald, a Russian, expressed a desire to stay in the United States and learn English better. Because it would have been unwise to bring this before the entire congregation, a few of us who represented the executive committee of that church got in touch with Marina Oswald.

To make a long story short, in due time and in cooperation with the FBI and others, Marina Oswald came to Ann Arbor. She slipped into our community at night by train while a battery of reporters was waiting ominously at the airport. She lived with a modest family that takes seriously its devotion to God and its love for people. When we were finally pressed to do so, we joined the University of Michigan in issuing a modest press release. The mail began to come in. There were some who were quick and hot to say that what we did was unpatriotic. Others told us that our action was unwise, still others that it was unfair. (One woman said that she had belonged to a church for forty years and what it had done for her in all that time she could write on the back of a postage stamp.) Campbell continued: I answered every letter, rightly or wrongly, feeling it the obligation of my ministry to do so. I said in effect to each person who criticized, "The one thing you haven't shown us is that what we have done is unlike Christ."

Although it goes against ever instinct you have, remember that Jesus tells his followers: "Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." This is God's message to a messy world. God has come in Jesus Christ. Amen.

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