

Sermon Notes for 11/29/15 (Advent 1)
Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN
Text: Luke 21:25-36
Theme: FEARING, PRAYING, SEEING, ESCAPING, STANDING

The Point: The certainty and the urgency of Christ's return ought to dominate our attitudes and actions as we wait for Him.

Introduction: We find in Holy Scripture two teachings that are predominant. First, Jesus the Messiah is coming again. Second, He is coming soon. One scholar has calculated that there are over 1800 references to the Messiah's second coming in the Old Testament and over 300 in the New Testament. These realities must occupy our attention whenever we turn to the words of Scripture. God's Word speaks clearly to people who are convinced of Christ's return and of its nearness. Christ is coming again. He is coming soon. It is no accident that we find these themes front and center in the readings for the last weeks of the church year – and still here on the threshold of the church's new year. And in today's Gospel lesson there are a number of important words that speak to how we are to wait. We will look in turn at each of these words: Fearing, Praying, Seeing, Escaping, and Standing. Let's dive in.

Fearing: Plenty of people's hearts are marked by fear as they observe the signs that Jesus spoke about, signs that signal the coming of the end of all things. "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, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken." Celestial signs, sun, moon and stars ceasing to give their light, signs of distress among and between nations and kingdoms, wars and rumors of wars, natural disasters as sea and wind and wave shake us up and devastate our wished-for security. Fainting from fear and foreboding. Fear is no pleasant reaction.

And when people are afraid, how do they react? Anger, regret, bitterness, revenge – such responses move people into harmful and spiteful words and actions. We see it all around. People are afraid that they are under judgment, so they try everything possible to cover their tracks. People are afraid their sins will come to light, so they lash out against anyone who might be able to be part of that unveiling. People are afraid, so they install security systems, purchase AK-47's, puts bars on their windows and even on their subdivisions, and remain locked up in their self-made prisons. But our Lord calls us to live above and beyond fear. He promises to be our confidence, our security, our stronghold.

Well-known preacher Charles Swindoll has written these words: "The world system is committed to at least four major objectives, which I can summarize in four words: fortune, fame, power, pleasure. First and foremost: Fortune, money. The world system is driven by money; it feeds on materialism. Second: Fame. That is another word for popularity. Fame is the longing to be known, to be somebody in someone else's eyes. Third: Power. This is having influence, maintaining control over individuals or groups or companies or whatever. It is the desire to manipulate and maneuver others to do something for one's own benefit. Fourth: Pleasure. At its basic level, pleasure has to do with fulfilling one's sensual desires. It's the same mindset that's behind the slogan: 'If it feels good, do it.'" (*Living Above the Level of Mediocrity*, p.219) Swindoll has summarized the inclinations of a fearful world quite well. Fortune, fame, power, and pleasure – these goals drive and move people in a myriad of ways. And it seems to come back always to fear, doesn't it? Fear of not having enough, of not being important enough, of not being able to control things and people enough, of not being happy. It is all too often true of those who are disciples of Jesus.

Praying: So Jesus tells His disciples, "Be alert at all times, praying that you may have strength." How do God's people react to the various signs that cause fear? Well, for one thing, those signs prompt them to

pray. They realize that they are totally unable to control these seismic movements in nature and human relationships. That knowledge drives them to the One who is in control, the One who moves behind these signs to draw people to Himself. They are driven to their knees. "Pray at all times," we are told.

Prayer recognizes that I am not the one calling the shots, and that I prefer for God to exercise His will rather than my being allowed to impose my own. Prayer submits to the Father's superior knowledge, wisdom and skill in acting, realizing that I am all too likely to act according to my own self-interest. We have seen proof that our Lord will act according to His plan to provide salvation for all people, even if that plan demands putting His beloved Son on a cross to die for us sinners. Prayer is my acknowledgement that the self-giving will of our Lord stands above my own desires and wishes. Prayer that I might have strength indicates that I do not have the strength I need – but that God does, AND that He desires to give me that strength as I require it, to perform His will, whatever the circumstances, however dire the predictions, whatever may be required of me. Prayer puts fear to flight, for we need not fear those circumstances which our Lord has in His control.

When Luther's puppy happened to be at the table, he looked for a morsel from his master, and watched with open mouth and motionless eyes; he (Martin Luther) said, 'Oh, if I could only pray the way this dog watches the meat! All his thoughts are concentrated on the piece of meat. Otherwise he has no thought, wish or hope.' (Luther's *Tabletalk*) Another person has written, "Men may spurn our appeals, reject our message, oppose our arguments, despise our persons -- but they are helpless against our prayers." (Sidlow Baxter) Prayer enables us to focus on God's will and God's kingdom, and God hears and answers His people's prayers, so we had better pray bigger prayers, not just for things, but for the final fulfillment of Christ's kingdom: "Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly!" That brings us to the third word, seeing.

Seeing: Jesus says, "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near." Pay attention to what is happening! Do not just close your eyes to the realities that are unfolding around you! Watch with understanding! See with a heart of understanding, not just with the visual capacity of the eyes! What is it that we are to see? Interestingly, Jesus uses the illustration of a tree sprouting leaves, one of the harbingers of spring. I know that I have been very attentive to those signs of spring since we moved to Minnesota – perhaps that extra three or four weeks of delay makes me more conscious than ever how much I desire spring to come. Paying attention to the trees gives us a good idea as to when spring may burst forth.

For us as people of God's kingdom, the call is to see what God is doing. Watch the buds of His activity in the world and in our own lives! People who are hung up on the tragedies unfolding around them might miss the truth that is right before their faces. They need to know that God was once hung up – not on His own hard times, but on a cruel Roman cross. Look at that tree rooted on Calvary's mountain! See what God is doing there! Pay close attention to the love that holds Jesus to that horrible tree. Hear the promises that spring like new flowers from His lips, even in His dying breath: "Father, forgive them," "Behold your son/mother," "Today you will be with me in Paradise," "It is finished!" And realize that this episode of human history does not end on a forgotten hill, but in a garden with a barely-used tomb. Even if your sight is clouded, like that of Mary through her tears, Jesus' voicing of your name will get your attention again.

Escaping: "Pray[ing] that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place." We are not blind to what will happen as the world wends its way toward conclusion. We have had plenty of warning. We have already noted just how full of warning Holy Scripture is concerning the second coming of the Messiah. He came once in humility and weakness and subject to pain and death. He is coming again, no longer subject to pain or trouble or death, but as the God-appointed Judge of all creation. But that truth does not need to frighten us who live and trust in Jesus Christ. Prayer and faith stand us in good stead as the universe tears itself in pieces around us. Christ's people do not need to fear the approach of

the end, since by God's grace we will escape the judgment that is certainly coming.

St. Peter writes (2 Peter 1:4), "He has given us . . . his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature." By faith you and I can escape the corruption of the world. By faith we can escape the threats that hang over the heads of those who oppose our Lord and Master. By faith we escape the horrors of judgment that will be spoken over the goats at Jesus' left hand: "Depart from me, you who are accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." By faith we carry out those actions that demonstrate our relationship with Jesus, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the prisoner, caring for the sick, taking in the stranger. By faith we know that on the final Day of Judgment we will hear the word of blessing, "Come, you blessed of my Father, receive the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." On that Day we will stand.

Standing: That brings us to the final word. Jesus says that His own people will ". . . stand before the Son of Man." We need not be afraid as the signs of the end unfold. We have the standing of children of the heavenly Father. We can stand in His presence, not because we have been so obedient or so compassionate or such good neighbors. We can stand by faith in the Lord Jesus, who has set aside His own standing in order to come among us, to give His life for us, and to adopt us as His brothers and sisters in the King's family.

During his 1960 presidential campaign, John F. Kennedy often closed his speeches with the story of Colonel Davenport, the Speaker of the Connecticut House of Representatives: On May 19th, 1780 the sky of Hartford darkened ominously, and some of the representatives, glancing out the windows, feared the end was at hand. Quelling a clamor for immediate adjournment, Davenport rose and said, "The Day of Judgment is either approaching or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for adjournment. If it is, I choose to be found doing my duty. Therefore, I wish that candles be brought." Rather than fearing what is to come, we are to be faithful till Christ returns. Instead of fearing the dark, we're to be lights as we watch and wait. (Harry Heintz)

Jesus has given us standing before the Father, so that when the final day arrives, we need not stand with heads hung in fear and trepidation. Rather, we will be able to raise our heads, knowing that our redemption has been fulfilled and that eternal life is ours.

Conclusion: The certainty and the urgency of Christ's return ought to dominate our attitudes and actions as we wait for Him. Christ is coming again. He is coming soon. When He comes, every eye will see Him, even the eyes of the ones who pierced His hands and feet in crucifixion. As we wait, we live without fear. We live by prayer and faith, eyes fixed on the One who has given His life in exchange for ours, the One who loves us beyond our understanding and who suffers that our sin might be buried once and for all in His tomb. We live in the confidence that on the final Day of Judgment we will escape the judgment that will befall those who cling to earth's promises. We live knowing that our standing today and on that day has been secured by the life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. AMEN!