

First Sunday in Advent
November 27, 1988

Text: St. Luke 21:25-36

The lessons for our Advent Sundays speak about being ready, alert, vigilant, being prepared, being on guard. Why do we have to be ready and alert? Because Christ is coming again. And with Christ will come the end of the world, and the judgment - Judgment Day as we call it.

What should be our response: stand up straight, and lift up your heads to look into the heavens, because you are about to be redeemed. Be alert, be ready, repent - but do not be afraid, hold your head up high. Our commentary looks at the first martyr, Stephan, who, while he is getting stoned to death, looks up to heaven and sees God in his glory and Jesus standing at his right hand. Yes, look straight up and look on the one we prepare to meet. You know the famous Advent hymn: "O How shall I receive him."

Certainly when the Holy Night comes, we think of receiving the Christ Child. But in our Advent Sundays the church bids us prepare for the end of the world, and the second coming of Christ - which means a lightning flash, and Christ returns triumphant - no longer the suffering Messiah, but the triumphant Messiah, ready to take charge and begin the judgment of the quick and the dead.

Martin Luther was asked what he would do if he were told that the world would come to an end tomorrow. "I would go outside and plant an apple tree." he answered. (Probably an apocryphal story.) As you may well know, an apple tree takes a long time to grow, many years. But Luther wanted to express his simple and humble confidence in God. And at the end of the World he would be in God's hands, like the tree he was planting, and he could stand assured, because the end of the world, as its beginning was, is in God's hand.

It's not good to make time-tables and count up the signs before the end - and have a score board by which we keep track of how close the end is at hand. No one knows the time or the hour, but only the Father in heaven. If our hearts have become "drowsy", ie. if we have allowed our compassion to go to sleep, or if we fill our days with drunkenness, or become totally preoccupied with matters of daily life like cooking, doing laundry, shopping, holding our job - then the day will spring upon us like a trap. It says that day will "assault" everyone on the face of the earth. So we have to be watchful and we have to pray that we can stand firm through the great sufferings of the end-time and the preparation to meet the Son of Man, who will ride in on the clouds of heaven.

Timetables and score cards for signs are no good. Oftentimes people have gotten deceived this way about the second coming. They thought they figured out the signs and the schedule - and then proclaimed the day. The Millerites, for instance, were such a group. They all gathered on a hill to await the Lord -

and had to come down sheepishly, without having been right about the date. They became the Jehovah Witnesses, who still are tempted to proclaim a day that will see the return of Christ. Only the Father in heaven knows of this day, and Luther's tree would have been growing, while the poor Millerites had sold all their possessions, and bereft - had to find some way to live again.

The statement: "This generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place." is either wrong, because the end of the world did not take place, or it has to be understood differently - that the temple would fall and Jerusalem would fall, and the world as the Jewish people knew it in that day, would come to an end. A lot of this chapter in Luke reads like the incredible terror and suffering that marked the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans, and the utter destruction of the temple in 76 A.D.

Sicknesses make us think of death. Any end can signify a greater end. When you think of the end of a proud nation of Israel in those days, it also makes you think of the end of the world. Even when you think of the end of your own life, you think of the end of the world - because although it is not the end of history - as Hal Lindsay says: "the late and great planet Earth" - that is no more...it is the end of the world for you - and you will not be aware of anything else until you are awakened upon Judgment Day.

In a sense our dying does make the next thing we know be the judgment - like when we sleep and a lot of time has passed, but we are unaware it passed, because we were sleeping. So the judgment comes upon us like a trap - and we have to take note and be ready.

Are you ready? How can you become ready if you are not? Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ can save you. Coming to the church can help you get ready - but not if you stay outside and are a St. Paul's coffee hour member. You only come for and prepare the coffee hour. That really doesn't get you ready.

You need to hear the Gospel. You need to hear the Word of God. You need to allow the Word of God to take hold of you and start changing you. You have to begin playing a role in the story of salvation - and if you are interested only in your own salvation, you are still in the prison house of your own selfishness. Our sin makes us curve everything to meet our own selfish ends, not only our money and our possessions, but also our religion and our prayer. Our sin makes our religion and our prayers just a bigger exercise in selfishness - unless Christ comes with a dread deed of deliverance.

By God's Word you can be made ready. And where are you going to hear it "live" if not in church? You see, the Word read from Scriptures, and preached and proclaimed here makes God come alive and start acting in our midst again. Our Advent prayers call upon God again and again: "Stir up your power and come, O Lord."

For example if you read about the exodus and passover in Psalm 114, it becomes the Word of God - and God is stirred up to give you an exodus....You might be up against a wall in your life - you might be at the end of your rope...and Christ like Moses of old, parts the sea before you, and you have a path upon which your feet can go. You have a way to live, where there was no way before.

And you have God starting working your particular passover from a useless and destructive life, to a participant in God's salvation of this world. The end of the world will not erase salvation, and those whom Christ has saved, need have no fear of the judgment.

So how can we become prepared to meet him? We need to hear the Word of God. We need to allow God to come in his Word, "represent" himself to us - and perform his mighty saving acts amongst us. You need to have your little exodus and your little passover. You need to be pulled out of the clutches of sin, of death and destruction, and raised up into new growth and life - so that you start becoming someone who participates in the work of salvation.

Maybe people that call themselves saved mean that God has done this for them. Nothing wrong with that. But the focus has to be on the mission Christ sends us on. We have to get to work on bigger passovers and greater exoduses and be ready for the end when it comes. Amen.