

+ Luke 21:25-36 + Prepare with Confident Watching + 1st Sunday in Advent + 30 November 2014 +

Happy New Year! Did you stay up until midnight last night to celebrate the beginning of a new Christian church year? Did you pause to give thanks that the Lord has brought you to the end of one church year and to the beginning of another? Did you look back on the past year with grateful thanks for God's grace in Word and Sacraments? Did you look ahead with joyful anticipation or even fearful trepidation? Probably not. I'm guessing that midnight passed in your home with no fanfare, but it is a new year!

No, it doesn't have the fanfare of December 31 changing into January 1, but it's just as important in the life of the Christian church. Today is the beginning of the season of Advent. Advent, which means "coming", is a season of anticipation, a season of expectation, a season of preparation.

Advent is a season of joyful anticipation. Like parents expecting the birth of a child or a child looking forward to Christmas, we look forward to Christ's coming with growing anticipation. While we eagerly look forward to the celebration of his first coming, we joyfully anticipate his return in glory.

Advent is a season of patient expectation. Patient expectation is the last thing you'd expect only four weeks from Christmas. In fact, we often get caught up in the rush to Christmas as soon as the leftovers disappear on Thanksgiving. Twinkly lights and the promise of Christmas presents dazzle our eyes, while the patient expectation of Advent gets set aside. So we take the time to wait and watch for Christ's coming with hope-filled hearts.

Advent is also a season of preparation. Yes, there is an endless amount of preparation between now and Christmas and the New Year, but such constant busyness isn't what Advent is all about. Advent is about preparing our hearts for Christ's coming. We prepare with repentance by recognizing that none of us deserves the grace of Christ's first coming while the reality of his second coming fills our hearts with fear. Thankfully the King who comes is also our merciful Savior. So we prepare for his coming by turning away from our old sins and living anew in Christ's forgiveness.

You can see why the season of Advent is so very important for the life of the Christian church, for your life and mine. It's a time of anticipation, expectation, and most of all, preparation. Today as we join Jesus and his disciples only days before his death, we heed his instruction and prepare for the coming of the Lord with **CONFIDENT WATCHING**. (Read Luke 21...)

If I were to ask you, "How do you know Christmas is coming?", you'd probably have no problem giving me an answer. Did your neighbors spend all day decorating the yard? Will you be getting the decorations and the Christmas tree put up soon? Perhaps you've already seen garland and holly and peppermint sticks adorning lampposts and malls. Maybe you already have plans to visit Lights on the Lake or have started penciling various Christmas parties into your calendar. There are even signs here at church! The Advent wreath is up front, and the paraments are blue for hope. All the "signs" point to the rapid approach of Christmas.

Jesus wanted his followers to know the signs of his second coming too. It was Tuesday of Holy Week—only a matter of days before the Advent King would become the Suffering Servant. He was about to fulfill the ancient prophecies of the Old Testament, the signs that God had laid out for his people to know the Savior was coming. While Jesus' disciples had seen him fulfill many of those prophecies as they had followed him, Jesus had other signs—confusing and terrifying signs—that someday would indicate his own return in glory. ***"There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken."***

The laws of nature will suddenly go out of whack. The sun, moon, and stars will seem to no longer follow their regular courses. The perfect balance of the heavenly bodies will be ***"shaken"***. The seas will rage and roar in a way never seen or heard before, and people will be terrified. ***"At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory."***

How frightening for those who reject Christ, who laugh at his promises, who deny the truth of his Word! How terrifying for those still in unbelief! How frightening these final signs could be for us who daily give in to the temptations of our own sinful natures and the sinful world around us! How terrifying because Jesus, the ***"Son of Man"***, will come again with great power and glory, not in lowliness and humility as he did when he first came. How terrifying because all your sins and mine, public and private, will be laid bare before Christ's all-seeing gaze, sins for which every one of us deserves to be condemned to eternal death in hell!

...But Jesus doesn't want you to know the signs just to terrify you. There's a reason a doctor wants a couple to know the signs of labor. If they know the signs, they can watch for them and face that challenging event with confidence. Jesus wants you to watch for his coming with confidence too. He explains, ***"When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near. Look at the fig tree and all the trees. When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near."***

When the trees and bushes bloom after a long winter, you know that summer is just around the corner. Even though we had summer-like weather earlier this month, all it took was a cold snap and a few flurries off the lake to remind us that the snows of winter were coming soon. You and I know when a new season is coming because we know the signs of the seasons.

The same is true of the signs leading up to Christ's coming. You have learned the signs from Jesus himself, so when they happen, you'll know he's coming soon. Rather than be terrified of the Last Day, you can confidently face Christ's coming because ***"your redemption is drawing near"***.

That's not saying that Jesus' work of forgiving your sins or earning your salvation is incomplete. No, when he came the first time, he lived a perfect life, because you failed to do so. He suffered the punishment of death and hell that you deserve. With his resurrection from the dead, Jesus washed away the guilt of every one of your sins, public or private, out of love for you. You are forgiven. You are saved, but you're not in heaven with Jesus yet.

That's why Jesus' second coming will be so filled with joy and anticipation for all believers. Christ is going to completely deliver you from this vale of tears to be with him body and soul forever in heaven. With his own life, Jesus guaranteed that promise, ***"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words (my promises) will never pass away."*** While knowing the signs of his coming gives us confidence, he wants us to always be on the watch.

Jesus explains, ***"Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with self-indulgence, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap. For it will come upon all those who live on the face of the whole earth. Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man."*** Jesus urges you and me to always be on the watch, because he could come back at any time. Unlike a special package, you can't track him. Unlike a baby's due date, you can't guess when he'll arrive. All we know is that he's coming soon.

Why, then, does he urge us to ***"be careful...be always on the watch, and pray..."***? As you and I know far too well, each of us is plagued with a sinful nature within us from the youngest infant to the oldest adult. That sinful nature wants to overwhelm you and prevent you from preparing for Christ's coming on the Last Day. If your sinful nature succeeds, if your heart is weighed down with indulging your selfish desires or with seeking temporary relief from life's troubles with alcohol or overeating or overspending or something else, if your heart is weighed down with the anxieties and worries and concerns and fears of this busy life, how sad it would be if Christ came back and found you unprepared for heaven and instead prepared for hell.

We need to always be watching for Christ's coming, but not out of terror or fear of his holy judgment. No, we need to always be watching with eager expectation of the eternal joy that will be ours when Jesus returns in glory. We need to always be watching with confident hope knowing the relief that Jesus will bring. So through faith in him, you can take the crushing burdens of your anxiety and guilt and leave them at the feet of Him who sets you free. As you watch and pray, as you spend time in the Word and at the Lord's Table, you can take your troubles to the One who promised, ***"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."*** (Matthew 11:28) With God's help, Jesus will find you ready for heaven when he comes.

Soon you will see Jesus, your Savior-King, ***"coming in a cloud with power and great glory"***. You will see the One, who once came in lowliness and humility for you. You will see the One, who gave his life on a cross for you. You will see the One, who rose from the dead in glory on Easter morning for you, but whose hands and feet still bear the scars of love for you. You will see him, even if your body is placed in a grave before then, and you will be with him forever. Christ is coming soon! Prepare. Be confident. Watch for ***"your redemption is drawing near"***! Amen.