

Sermon for the First Sunday of Advent, December 2, 2018

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

- Luke 21:28

Be afraid! Be very afraid! That’s how the world would have us respond to Christ’s return and the end of all things. But that’s not how Jesus says we should respond. No, dear Christians, you people of God, Jesus’ own brothers and sisters whom He has bought with a price and washed clean with His own blood, no, to you He says, *“stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”*

This is the attitude which Advent would instill in us whose faith and hope is in Jesus. One, not of fear, but of faith, confidence, and hope. Because for you, O Christian, the advent, the coming, the arrival, of our God is the fulfillment of God’s promise. His promise to Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, to Moses and the children of Israel, to Joshua, to David, to the Prophets, to the Apostles, the saints and martyrs, and to you in Your baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

This is what Advent is to prepare us for. This is what Jesus prepares us for in our readings today. In our first lesson we hear from the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah was called to preach the Word of the Lord to the people of Jerusalem and Judah in their most desperate hour. Walled up in Jerusalem, surrounded by the army of Babylon, running out of food and water, Jeremiah is sent to deliver the unenviable message that all is lost. Because of their sins and the sins of their ancestors the Lord has raised up the Babylonians to destroy Jerusalem and cart her people off to Babylon to live in exile from the land the Lord had given them.

Jeremiah has been sent to tell the people, *“Your getting what’s coming to you. It’s too late to repent. It’s too late to make God change His mind. This is it.”* But in the midst of all the doom, in the midst of Jeremiah’s own gloom at having to bear such a message, the Lord gives Him a promise to speak.

The prophet of doom is, for once, given good news, *“The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah.”* Not the promise of destruction for sin, but the older promise, the promise of a redeemer, of a king who will sit on David’s throne forever!

The Lord says, through Jeremiah, *“In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and He shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it (the righteous Branch) will be called: “The Lord: our righteousness.”*

The NRSV in your bulletin doesn’t bring forth the heaven-rending nature of what Jeremiah says. It reads, “The Lord is our righteousness.” Which is a nice statement of fact, but the problem is the Lord can be our righteousness whether He is here or far away in the heavens. It would be better to read it not as a statement about the Lord, but for what it is, a name – The Lord: our righteousness.

The righteous Branch that God will raise up, the one who shall execute justice and righteousness in the land is none other than the Lord, YHWH, God Himself. And furthermore, to the sinners who have wandered from God, Jeremiah says, you will be righteous. Not because you made yourselves righteous. No, your righteousness is the Lord Himself. And He will be here. Not off in the heavens far away, but here with us, with you.

Jeremiah is of course speaking of Jesus. It is Jesus who fulfills this promise when He takes on our flesh and knits Himself a body of flesh and bone in the womb of

the Blessed Virgin Mary. Here in the Virgin's womb, here in the manger, here at the Jordan, tempted by the devil in the wilderness here, here walking the paths of Galilee is the Lord: our righteousness. Here in the Garden of Gethsemane wrestling with the Father in prayer, here rejected by the chief priests, scribes, elders, and tried by Pilate is the Lord: our righteousness. Here hung between heaven and earth, bearing our sins in His own flesh and blood is the Lord: our righteousness. Here in your grave is the Lord: our righteousness. Here, risen from the dead is the Lord: our righteousness.

And that means that He who has ascended to the right hand of the Father, who stands before the Father as our great high priest day and night, is our righteousness, is your righteousness. And that is good news.

Yet still, here we are in world that is broken by sin. A world where even after the resurrection death seems to reign. We struggle with sin and death, not just outside of ourselves but within our bodies – in our own flesh and blood.

Does this mean that Jesus has failed? Does this mean that God has failed to keep His promises? No. For the promise was never that in this life we would be sinless. The promise was never that in this life we would be victorious over sin. The promise was never that in this life we will not die.

The promise was the Lord, who is our righteousness, would come to us. That He would be our righteousness and victory in the face of sin. That He would be the One who stands as the reason, the argument, the proof that death should have no lasting power over us. And that is what He has done. Yet, even as He did that for us, He gave us another promise which we find in our Gospel reading.

He promises the disciples that after His crucifixion, death, resurrection, and ascension, He will come again. That He will come again, and at that time sin and death will pass away. See that's included when He says, "*Heaven and earth will pass away.*"

When we hear Him say heaven and earth will pass away, we get a little nervous. When we hear Him talk about *“signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves.”* We get uncomfortable. *“The powers of the heavens”* being shaken, is not a good thing.

Or is it? Because as scary as that may sound, heaven and earth passing away, it's good news. See that is what is needed for sin and death be done away with. Sin and death are things of this world, this cosmos. If the heavens and earth of which they are a part are gone... then sin and death are gone as well.

Yet, what will not pass away is Jesus' word. God's word endures forever. God's promise endures forever. This is why you are to stand up and raise your heads. Because You have received God's Word – Jesus Christ. You have been united to God's own Word, God's own Son, to God, in Your Holy Baptism.

It was God's word that was spoken to you when the pastor poured the water on you and said, *“I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”* And from that moment on you have been united to Jesus, washed in His blood, fed and nourished with His own flesh and blood. You are not righteous when you look at yourself, when others look at you, be honest, your sin sticks out like a sore thumb. And when in the dark of night, and in the quiet moments when you have no computer, or cell phone, or radio, or TV to distract you... you know two truths – all have sinned including you – and death is coming for you.

And it's precisely because that's true that Jesus says to you, you in particular, *“Stand up and raise your head, because your redemption is drawing near. For I, the Lord: your righteousness, I am your redemption.”*

Be ready for Jesus to come. Not because you're afraid of judgment, but because you already know how He has judged. The answer is there on the cross. The answer is found in His now empty grave. The answer is found in the marks of the nails in His hands and feet, and the spear in His side. All that is left is to untangle

the sin and the death from you, so that they will pass away. So, do not be afraid. For in Him you have nothing to fear.

That said, we also need to take His warning to heart. We don't know when He is coming. Even He does not know, but only the Father. Judged on a human scale He seems to have tarried a bit. He seems to be taking more than a while. Two thousand years is a long time, especially compared to our 70, 80, 90, or 100 years. So, He reminds us to stay alert, to stay watchful. *"Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life."* He's not just talking here about the great big sins: fornication, adultery, murder, stealing... or even actual drunkenness.

But all the myriad seemingly harmless little things that pull us this way and that. The chores to be done, the errands to run, the meals to make, the clothes to wash. Don't let all the little things of this world, all its busyness, all the tasks of life, distract you, wear you down, and impair your ability to pay attention to the signs that this world is passing away. Jesus is coming.

It is not a matter of if. Just when. And the signs He gives, *"signs in the heavens," "the roaring of the waves"* and elsewhere nation rising against nation, famine, disease. Those aren't a specific list with boxes to check off. They are normal, almost, sadly, routine. And that should cue us in to our need to pay attention always. To watch, to wait, to be ready.

How do we watch, and wait, and be ready? It's not a manner of scanning the heavens, or making sure we've done all the right things and none of the wrong things. We watch, and wait, and are made ready by hearing His Word and receiving His sacraments. For it's the Word that cuts through the noise and business of this life to say to us, "Be alert! He's coming!" It's the Word that speaks life in the face of death and says, "Do not be afraid! He has gone here before you and will come here again to get you." It's the Word that speaks forgiveness to us, that sets our hearts free with the truth that no matter the depths of our

unrighteousness He is our righteousness, and is here with us, because we are united to Him, and fed on Him.

And so it is that we are made ready for Him as He speaks to us, forgives us, and feeds us. We can pray as He says, *“that [we] may have strength to escape all [the] things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man,”* because the Son of Man is the Lord: our righteousness. Therefore, we will be blameless on the Last Day because we are His, and He is ours.

Until that day, along with all the saints, watch, and wait, and hear His Word, and receive His sacraments and pray. Then, *“stand up and raise your heads because your redemption is drawing near.”* Amen, and Come, Lord Jesus.