

JEREMIAH 33:14-16 (p. 647)

NOVEMBER 28, 2021

LUKE 21:25-36 (p. 855)

BLAINE

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

As we enter Advent Lord—a time of intentional waiting—we eagerly expect your Presence. Historically, and traditionally, we wait for you to come as a babe in a Manger. Eschatologically, and ultimately, we await your arrival in Judgment and Mercy at the End of Time. And in between Lord, right now, this very minute, we await you Spiritually. We look for your Presence to well-up in our hearts, and bubble over into our world! We ask for these gifts now, in Jesus' Name. Amen.

“WHAT TIME IS IT?”

Someone sent me a “Far Side” Comic a while back that pretty much says it all! A scholarly looking young man—a Sheldon-type from the Big Bang Theory—is standing at the front door of a huge, institutional building. At the top of the building there is a great big sign that reads, “Midvale School for the Gifted”. The guy looks brilliant, like he belongs! Maybe a bit nerdy, but obviously brilliant! In one arm he is carrying a huge stack of books. And in the other, a laptop computer. He is leaning on the door with his shoulder, pushing with his upper body, straining against the glass! But try as he might, he can't seem to push open the door! And there, in front of him, in big, bright, bold red lettering, is a sign that says “PULL”! Like I said, it pretty much says it all! So, how are you at reading signs? Because that's really Jesus' caution today.

The Lectionary has brought us yet another text on Eschatology, the End of Time! Maybe you noticed? It's probably because we are beginning the season of Advent, and everything is about to change! Today, we begin actively watching and waiting for Messiah to break into our world. Today, we anticipate "Immanuel", God with us! And today, Jesus shares an "Apocalypse", something hidden. A "Revelation" in Latin and English! An "unveiling", if you will! So, imagine unveiling a priceless work of art!

Jesus is talking about things that will happen, "relatively soon". But He is also talking about things that will happen "somewhere down the line". The Disciples, of course, want to know "when" these things will take place. Who wouldn't! So, Jesus shares some signs to look for, prior to the End. He even offers a parable about a Fig Tree in order to make His point! And His point is, "how" those who wish to follow Him need to live until that time. We talked about it a couple of weeks ago, remember? It's a pretty straight forward concept really. "Keep watch", says the Lord. "Pay attention! Be ready!" He even tells us why! "So that that day won't suddenly close on you like a trap"! Which makes me wonder if we are? Paying attention? Noticing the signs? Watching for budding Fig Trees?

I know some people are fascinated with Eschatology. They diligently try to figure out "Last Things". And their excitement grows with every new book, or movie on the topic. Think "Late Great Planet Earth" or "Left Behind". Picture the blockbusters "Deep Impact", "The Day After Tomorrow", or Bruce Willis' movie "Armageddon"!

And I know others aren't really interested in the subject at all. It seems like ancient history to them. Or strictly symbolic. Or a series of events so far "down the line" that it doesn't even apply. I get both ends of the spectrum! I do!

But Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, all share Eschatological Signs in their Gospels! As does Paul, in several of his letters. So, do many of the Old Testament Prophets as well! And then, of course, there is always John's Book of Revelation! That dusty one, way in the back of your Bible that you never read! Besides, this is the second time in the last few weeks that the Lectionary has brought us this very same account of Jesus' teaching—first from Mark, and now from Luke! So obviously, there is something here that we need to pay attention too, right? And "Pay Attention", is exactly what Jesus says! "Keep Watch! Be Ready! So that you will not be caught unaware!"

Apparently, catastrophic things often happen quite suddenly! Maybe you've noticed? On January 27, 1986, everyone was ready. A great multitude, in fact, were even watching! Our eyes were riveted to our television sets. NASA advertised this as "the all-time greatest space launch ever"! We had a schoolteacher on board, remember, a woman, an astronaut. It was one of the most exciting days in American history! We waited with anticipation, excited. Suddenly there was an ignition of raw power, and the rocket shot straight up, higher and higher! And then, just as suddenly, it exploded!

Our dreams suddenly exploded too! Our hopes suddenly exploded! Suddenly, there was a river of tears streaming from our eyes. It happened so fast too—like a “thief in the night”, like “a snare suddenly snapping shut”!

It happened near Naples, Italy, sixty or so miles from a sleepy little village called Bowlwana. Fifty-six years before the Shuttle launch, in 1930, fourteen hundred people were killed in a massive earthquake. Twenty-two years earlier, in 1908, in that same region, 123,000 people lost their lives! The seismologists kept saying, “Be alert! Be ready! It will happen again! You are a fool to live here! If you have any brains, you will move away, and move now! You are living in a major earthquake zone!

And then, suddenly, as if without warning, an earthquake with a 6.8 magnitude on the Richter scale, struck unexpectedly! Within thirty minutes, fourteen hundred people were dead! Their friends and relatives said, “Yeah, we knew that some day it would come. But it happened so...suddenly.” “So, will it be for you, at the End of Time,” says the Lord. “I will come unexpectedly, like a thief in the night; suddenly, quickly, when you are not expecting it”!

It happened in South East Asia too, right after Christmas in fact, on December 26, 2004? You probably saw it on the news. The reporting was so real! It was almost as if we were right there!

The second largest earthquake in recorded history, 9.31 on the Richter scale, came suddenly from deep beneath the sea, without warning! Then a Tsunami Wave spread out across the entire Indian Ocean! Most school-age children now know the meaning of the word, "Tsunami"! A murdering wall of water rolled silently across the region, like a thief in the night, leaving 220,000 dead in its wake! People five thousand miles away from the epicenter of that quake were killed by a deadly wall of rushing water! It happened suddenly, unexpectedly, like a snare slamming shut! "So, it will be at the End of Time," says Jesus!

It happened as we watched the Twin Towers on 9/11, didn't it? When we went to work the sun was shining, and everything was normal. And then, suddenly everything changed, just like that! It happened a couple of years ago as Deb and I were flying back from Costa Rica. Right there, on the Television, in the International Terminal of the Houston Airport, the Reporter was talking about the worldwide spread of a virus called COVID-19! Suddenly everything changed!

It happens in emergency rooms daily, doesn't it, with the arrival of bad news! Or out on the street, just before the ambulance arrives. It happens at work with a pink slip! Or at home, with the arrival of papers from the lawyer! It happens in the middle of the night, with just a phone call! Suddenly, without warning, when no one is expecting it, you are caught completely unaware! "So, it will be at the End," says Jesus. So be ready, because the Advent of the Lord is at hand! It's drawing near, even now!

So, are you ready? And are you watching for that time? Are you actually prepared? Can you read the signs? Because that's really the question, isn't it? I am not talking about being prepared for Christmas, with all the schmooze and tradition that comes with it! I am talking about the Advent of the Lord, the Arrival of God in your midst, right here and now! Are you ready? Do you see the signs? Do you understand the signs? The ones staring you in the face? Or are you just standing there, with all of your books of wisdom, and all of your learning, yet unable to discern the sign that says "Pull"?

It's a great question, isn't it? Maybe "THE QUESTION"! Are you still pushing when you should be pulling? Are so engrossed in your goal, where you are currently headed, that you don't actually see the signs pointing to where you will ultimately end up? It is a good question! But are you missing the obvious? Or worse, ignoring the signs?

First Century Believers, Followers of the One True God, were waiting expectantly for the Advent of the Lord! But only a few were ready for it when it came! The First Advent of Jesus Christ caught most people completely unaware! Prophets like Jeremiah had talked about that "Great and Glorious Day of the Lord" for quite some time! Many Prophets did in fact! And almost everyone believed that it would eventually come! Most of the Faithful were even sure what it would look like! And longed for it to appear!

And that was part of the problem! They expected “one thing”, but got quite another! They were positive “how” all this would look, how things would unfold! But suddenly it came quite differently, like a thief in the night, actually, like a trap springing shut!

And we can see why that happened, can't we? Some people had grown tired of hearing about it, and so, stopped listening! Some just assumed that it was a long-ways off, and so, stopped thinking about it! Some started taking this life, and all that goes along with this life, way too seriously! Or taking it for granted! Or acting as if “this life” is the “only life” that really matters! And some, simply assumed that all the warnings couldn't possibly pertain to them, not personally! So, they just weren't ready!

It should have been clear, right? It's hard for us to imagine! But then we have two thousand years of hindsight under our belts! And hindsight, is always 20/20! I mean we know that God's Messengers had laid out the Truth beforehand, giving all Believers something to cling to when the storms suddenly begin to rage around them! We can clearly see that those First Century Believers just weren't ready, right! They must be so different from us! We can read the signs, can't we? None of us are still shoving on the entrance door, are we? We understand the time, right?

Did you know that there are two very different Greek words, translated as “time” in the New Testament? The first is “Kronos”, from which we derive the English word “chronology”. It refers to clock time, or calendar time—hours, or days, or years! If you want to know if there is enough physical time left in the day, you ask about “Kronos”.

The other word for time, however, is “Kairos”. “Kairos” has nothing to do with clocks or calendars, nothing to do with people marking time, but rather focuses on asking, “is this the right time”, the “critical moment”! It’s like when my wife, at 1:00 A.M., leaned over and said, “My water just broke”! It’s time! Suddenly, nothing else really matters!

“Kairos” is the word that Jesus uses here, talking about His Second Coming, when He tells us to not be frightened when we hear about wars and rumors of wars! These things must happen before that time, He says! Nations will rise against Nations, and Kingdom against Kingdom! There will be earthquakes, and famines, and pestilences in various places, and fearful events, and great signs from Heaven! My faithful witnesses will be persecuted, brought before those in authority! But all this will be an opportunity for those who follow me to witness to the world on my behalf! Those close to you, your family members and friends, will simply not understand! Many will pull away from you, and some will treat you badly, all because of your Faith! And you will know when the “time is right”, to be sure, because you’ll see Jerusalem surrounded by armies! That will tell you that desolation is near!

Just for kicks, look at a map of the Middle East sometime while you listen to the News. Notice, for instance, that Syria borders Israel on the northwest, right on the Golan Heights. In fact, Damascus is just an hour and half by car from Upper Galilee. Look at how close Beirut actually is to Jerusalem, or Lebanon in general. Notice how close Turkey sits. Maybe note where Iraq and Iran are situated, you know, in relation to the City of David. Or that Saudi Arabia is just to the southeast, and Egypt just to the southwest. And then listen to what is currently taking place! Listen to what those nations surrounding Israel, and it's Capital City of Jerusalem, are saying! Do you realize that from 70 AD until May of 1948, Israel, as a nation, didn't even exist? Until roughly a generation ago, our generation, Jerusalem couldn't be surrounded by enemies! But now!

The Seas will start to toss and turn at that time, says Jesus, and crash upon the land. Maybe it's from global warming—or maybe not. Maybe it's a cataclysmic reversal of the earth's magnetic poles, like scientists are currently talking about? Or maybe not? There will be Signs in the heavens; Astrological changes and stellar realignments. Maybe it will include a Galactic Solar Alignment, like the one we had a couple of years ago, when the Sun moved into the very center of the Milky Way Equator! Or maybe not! The Sun will start to do weird things, The Lord says, like having a big increase in Solar Flares, much like what is currently happening in the 20th Century! “And at that time,” Jesus says, “the people of the earth will be perplexed, in anguish”! He warns us to pay attention, to keep watch, to be prepared! His point though, is to NOT be “perplexed”, or “in anguish”!

Again, Jesus tells us that preparation is the key! When these things happen, He says, when that time comes, “do not let your hearts get weighed down by carousing, or drunkenness, or the anxieties of life”! It says “dissipation” in some versions, rather than carousing, which I had to look up. It means to “frivolously waste your time and resources on things that don’t matter”! You’re not wasting time and resources on things that don’t matter, are you? You are not letting your heart become weighed down by the anxieties of life? You are indeed standing up, lifting your head as you see these signs, right? Witnessing? You realize that your redemption is drawing near! You’re ready!

There was a tourist exploring the sites of Lake Como in northern Italy when he came to a beautiful castle called the Villa Asconiti. Feeling brave, he pushed open the gate and went inside. To his delight, everything was beautiful. Flowers were blooming in a rainbow of color. The shrubbery was luxuriously green and magnificently pruned to precision. Over to the side, the man noticed a gardener on his hands and knees clipping nearly every blade of grass. So, he asked, “May I look at the gardens?” The gardener replied, “You’re welcome to come right in. I’m glad to have a guest”. The man began to tour the grounds and asked the gardener “Is the owner here today?” The gardener replied, “Oh, no. He’s away”. “When was the last time you saw him?” the tourist asked. “Oh, about twelve years ago,” said the gardener. “Twelve years? This place has been empty, for twelve years?” “Yes,” said the gardener.

The tourist then asked, “Who tells you what to do?” The gardener explained that the owner has an agent in Milan. “Do you ever see him?” asked the tourist. Still clipping, pruning, and trimming, the gardener answered, “Never. He just sends instructions”. The tourist couldn’t believe his ears. “But you have everything so beautiful. It looks like you are expecting him tomorrow.” To which the gardener replied, “Today, sir! I expect him to come at any time—perhaps today”!

That’s our take-home. That’s the image I want each one of us to carry as we leave here today. The Advent of The Lord will happen! And it will do so at an unexpected time! Of that we can be sure! But His Instructions, until that time, are simple and clear! The heavens will be shaken, the sun and moon and stars may not look or act like they usually do. There will be great fear and panic in the world. It will appear as if all hell has broken loose! The seas will be tossing and turning. The waves will be crashing all around you. And all of your worldly anchors will simply let go! But your job, until that time—and especially during that time, as you see it happen even, as the signs unfold right before you—your job, is to stand up and lift head!

Don’t allow yourself to be crushed by the anxieties of life, or to drown in wastefulness! Instead, be buoyed up by the Truth! Let the winds blow where they may! Let the ground tremble beneath your feet even! But know that your tomorrow is safe and secure! Rejoice, in fact, when things are bad! Witness when things are bad! Rejoice always, because your redemption is drawing near! And all of God’s people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

Almighty God, Creator, and Redeemer, and Sustainer of all that there is, all there was, and all there ever will be—we stand before you this morning trusting in your great love! We come today before your Holy Throne, offering Praises and Thanksgivings for all the Blessings that you have placed into our lives. We have so much to be thankful for, and so much to look forward to, and so much that we take for granted! We lift up our love and our adoration to you this morning Lord. We thank you for sharing all these joys that come to us from your own hand. And we thank you especially Father, for the gift of your Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Because of Him, we are Blessed indeed!

But we also come, Lord, touched by some burdens, or weighed down by some worries and anxieties and cares. Humbly Lord, with a bit of fear and trepidation, we come before you in prayer. And yet in ultimate confidence, Lord, and in faith, we offer all these things up to you. We pray that you will lighten our heavy load. We pray that you will strengthen our resolve, deepen our faith, and increase our wisdom so that we might make you known in the world. And we pray for your Presence Lord, powerfully and overflowing, so that those around us will see your Glory and Majesty living in our hearts!

Father, some of the Joys and some of the Burdens that we bring before you today in prayer, are for ourselves. But others, Lord, are for those we love. Today, we lift up before you..... We ask you to please heal the hurts Lord. Please mend the broken hearts, and calm the troubled minds of all those who call upon your Name. And please, hear us now, as we pray together the very prayer that Jesus taught us, saying, Our Father...