

Pastor Daniel Iwinski
11/29/09
First Sunday in Advent

St. Paul's (WELS) Moline, IL
2:48
Matthew 21:25-36

Watch and Pray

- I. *While the world is passing away;*
- II. *God gives us work to do!*

Today is not only a new day but a new church year as well. Advent is the beginning of the season of anticipation. Indeed, 'advent' means coming.' How does Jesus come to us? Jesus comes to us bodily when He takes on human flesh and becomes man. This is what most people think of: they view advent as pre-Christmas. But this is not all advent celebrates. The second aspect of advent is that this same Jesus who died as a man and who has risen to new life is now seated at the right hand of His Father and is in control of all things. This Jesus our risen Savior and King will return just as He promised He would and He will take us into heaven where we will receive all He has prepared for us. This second aspect is harder for us to celebrate.

It is harder for us because our Gospel reading for today the beginning of the new church year doesn't seem all that different from the past several weeks of 'end time.' Indeed it is not different. Why begin with the same message that you ended with? Because the message is all so important. The end time and the consummation of all things where the Christian receives all the promised gifts of God is the very purpose and reason for Christmas--the incarnation of Jesus.

Why did God take on human flesh? He took on human flesh to live that perfect life free from sin free from separation from God. Jesus took that perfect life and sacrificed in on the cross so that by His death sin could be atoned for and that people could receive the gift of grace. The cross of Jesus was there that night in the stable, in the inn as Mary gave birth. The cross cast a shadow over the entire life of Jesus. The Bible reminds us of this from the words of Simeon spoken to Mary when Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the Temple: "**This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.**" (Luke 2:34-35). Yes the cross was there from the very beginning and it shaded and colored all of Jesus' life. Jesus came to the world because He had work to do; even more appropriate would be to say that He had a work to do--to save the world. Jesus came to die on the cross that we may live in Him, now and forever. Today we who live in Jesus also have a work to do in this world, in His name.

We may want a different message other than the one Jesus gives us today because we just spent so much time covering the end but the words Jesus speaks are words with a focus on the here and now; they ultimately focus on what we need to be doing every day of our lives. What does Jesus tell us to do? We are to watch and we are to pray.

Jesus gave a list of signs that the faithful should look for. Then He told them the parable of the fig tree. "**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.**" (Luke 21:29b-31.) What are the signs that we need to be watching for? What will God show us that his return is all so close? Jesus said they would be signs in nature. But there is another interesting facet regarding Jesus' revelation to us.

The end times teachings are recorded by the first three Gospels--- Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Our passage of Luke 21 compares with Matthew 24 and Mark 13. As I preached over the past weeks examining Jesus words in Matthew 24 Jesus also emphasized how on the one hand things are going to be very hard and bad before He comes again but also that there will be a normalcy and even a complacency before He returns. The signs in nature will be evident to believers but not to unbelievers who do not have the Spirit of the Lord. What exactly are the signs in nature? It is our Gospel for today.

"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. At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." (Luke 21:25-28). Jesus speaks clearly and plainly that nature will be displaying signs that things are not right--namely signs in the sky. Faithful church people have struggled over the last two thousand years on just how to best understand Jesus' words.

Luther in a sermon for a Sunday in Advent did what was typical for his day and allegorized the symbols. Luther speaks on the corresponding words of Jesus from the book of Matthew where Jesus says that:

**"`the sun will be darkened,
and the moon will not give its light;
the stars will fall from the sky,
and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.'** (Matthew 24:29).

Luther reinterpreted in terms of the church in the world. Luther said the sun was Jesus who because of false teachings of mankind who distorted Jesus from Savior to lawgiver would no longer be able to bring the comfort He earned for the world. The church, symbolized by the moon giving up the pure gospel and replacing it with works righteousness was like the moon not giving the light of Christ to the world. The stars, Luther said, was the Christians who having lost or abandoned the faith where falling from their rightful place in heaven. An interesting interpretation by Luther and while going beyond the text a good reminder of our great calling to faith and trust in Jesus. Is Luther's allegory the best way to understand Jesus' words? While they are interesting and have merit I believe we need to simply hear the words of Jesus plainly and look for literal

changes and signs in the heavens. After all Jesus is grabbing our attention and telling us--even commanding us--"watch! look!"

It has been said that every generation looks at the world around them and believes that there day is the end time and the very last days before Jesus arrives. The early Christians who thought Jesus would be coming very soon thought that. Indeed in our words from Jesus today He states **"I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened."** (verse 32). Of course that exact generation did not receive the second coming of Christ so we understand Jesus' use of the term generation to mean the time when believers and unbelievers will be standing upon the earth: there will always be believers because the church will not perish on earth; yet, unfortunately there will be unbelievers too. That is why some look at the signs of Christ and draw comfort and hope because Jesus is coming for them and others will look at the same signs and will **'faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming upon the world.'** (verse 26). This is why the signs that Jesus spoke about must be taken literally and not figuratively or allegorically.

What exactly will the sun look like just before Jesus comes and how can the sun be darkened? To be sure I don't know right now; but trusting in Jesus who tells me to watch I can be sure that with Christ's words and with the Holy Spirit I will know when it is time.

What I find terribly interesting is that there are people in the world vocalizing that things are not right and that if things don't change drastically that the world will not survive. We hear it on the daily news every day and it is the modern day green movement, or global warming or whatever label you may want to attach to it. That is terribly interesting and should give us pause.

Today people are apprehensive, they are 'fainting' from the terror of the physical creation and they are even so bold as to say that unless things change nothing is going to survive. They are preaching, in essence an end of the world message! That is why many in the world are listening to them.

Do I personally believe this is the sign of the sun, moon and stars? There are two great tendencies: one is to think these must be the last days; the other is to become callous and think that because everyone throughout history thought they were near or the very last generation then no one should really think that way. There are some obvious things for us to remind ourselves of.

First, is that within our lifetimes things can take place now that were impossible even twenty years ago. First, everyone on earth is connected by information and technology. Second, within our lifetimes the genetic blueprint for people has become greatly understood. Third, in the last fifty years for the first time in history mankind has the potential of extinguishing all life on earth. More than anything else what concerns me is that our technology is changing greater than our ethical commitment to absolute values such as truth and justice. In fact just the opposite has taken place: while technology has exploded mankind's recognition that any moral or ethical truth has greatly diminished. This, more than anything else is telling.

The last connection to today's society and to Jesus' words are the scope. Today technology reaches every inch of our globe and encapsulates every living person and creature on the world. What does Jesus tell us today: **"Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, 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."** (verses 34-35). No one is immune; no one will escape. By God's grace His gifts do extend to everyone, and it is too everyone, all of creation, that the Gospel is given. This is what we are to do today.

God doesn't want us to just hunker down and survive--it would have just been easier to remove the church from the world if that was God's plan. Rather we are to be in the world, we are to be agents of change for the world. We are to look around us and see the way things really are and to know what will happen in the future. Jesus gives us all of these things. We are children of the light and not of the darkness. Jesus gives us another job today. Pray! Pray for the world. Pray for leaders. Pray for the church and her great mission. Pray for your loved ones and your family members and yes pray for yourself too.

An interesting thing happens when you pray. When you pray you are comforted with the knowledge and promise that God will hear and answer your prayer. Indeed Jesus promises us: **"I will do whatever you ask in my name."** (John 14:13). Jesus also says: **"You will receive whatever you ask for in prayer."** (Matthew 21:22).

Prayer is the antidote to anxiety. Prayer is the antidote to the problems and the concerns of the world today. There is another aspect to prayer: it is extremely difficult to pray for someone on a regular basis and then not to change your behavior towards them. For example it is hard to daily pray for a particular person's conversion and not to have that spill over in your actions and words towards that person. Prayer doesn't change God but it does change us!

Is the world passing away? Yes. Will Jesus come back soon? We have good reason to believe so, and I do not say that overly dramatically or lightly. Do we have a job to do? Yes, we are to watch, we are to take heart and know that nothing can separate us from the love of God who while we were still powerless took on human flesh to save us and who gives us His words to live by and in today. And we are to pray, to pray for everyone that they may know and believe in Christ. Our new year has begun! Watch! Pray! Amen.