

The Second Sunday in Advent
Luke 21:25-36; Romans 15:4-13

There's a ton of Scripture in my sermon today. Scripture always interprets Scripture and I wanted to be careful so that you know what I'm saying is shown in Scripture. Let's start with Jesus directly! He says,

"There will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." (Lk 21:25-28)

There will be signs before Jesus comes. In fact, all the signs have already happened. They've come and will continue to come until Jesus returns. We've had both sun and moon eclipses, shooting stars, although it's hard to see them with all our light pollution. We've had earthquakes, tornados, volcanic eruptions, tsunamis, and even distress of nations. And we've had COVID. We know that these things will get worse, but I don't know how good a judge we'll be of them getting worse. It seems every generation complains about the succeeding generation and how bad things are. Listen to Luther on this same text about 500 years ago:

"I will not force or press anyone to believe as I do; neither will I permit anyone to deny me the right to believe that the Last Day is not far away. Just these signs and words of Christ move me [to that belief]. For the history of the centuries that have passed since the birth of Christ nowhere reveals conditions like those of the present. There has never been such building and planting in the world. Such dainty and varied eating and drinking has not been as common as it now is. Clothing has become so costly that it cannot become more so. Who has ever heard of such commerce as now encircles the world and swallows the world?" (AE 75.92)

Luther was not only looking at the signs of natural disasters that Jesus talks about, but also Jesus' comments from Matthew:

“For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.” (Mt 24:37-39)

In other words, life will be going on as normal when Christ returns. Luther also points out that the dimming of the sun or moon cannot mean their destruction because of what Genesis 8:22 says. God promises Noah that “while the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.” This is also shown by the Revelation:

When [the Lamb] opened the sixth seal, I [John] looked, and behold, there was a great earthquake, and the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree sheds its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. The sky vanished like a scroll that is being rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?’” (Revelation 6:12–17)

When the moon and sun and stars and sky are destroyed, Jesus will be back. This is the time that every knee shall bow to God, even those hiding in caves. (Phil 2:10) And the signs for that return have been fulfilled. Listen to Walther from about 160 years ago:

“There is no doubt: all the signs that should precede the unexpected appearance of the Last Day of the world have been fulfilled long ago.”
(Walther, Gospel Sermons: Volume 1, pg. 13)

Which means that Jesus could come at any time: today, tomorrow, next week, next year, next decade or even next century. Jesus warns us so that we might be ready for His coming:

“But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap.” (Lk 21:34)

This life is good. To be sure, it is filled with much suffering and misery because of our sin, but it is good. It’s good to be alive. But there’s so much more in store for those of us who love Jesus. There’s life without all the suffering and misery. But the only way to that better life is through Jesus. The cares of day-to-day life do tend to bog us down and tempt us to lose the eternal mindset. Jesus warns us to beware of this.

And He mentions Noah. This is very fitting because Paul says in our Epistle reading today:

For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. (Romans 15:4)

In the time of Noah, God says this about mankind:

The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, “I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, man and animals and creeping things and birds

of the heavens, for I am sorry that I have made them.” But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord. (Genesis 6:5-8)

Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord that same way you do... through faith. God determined to destroy the inhabitants of the earth through the flood. But Noah, his three kids, and all their wives found favor with God and God provided shelter for them. He instructed Noah to build the ark so that he and his family and representatives of every living thing could pass safely through the waters of judgment. We don't know how many years it took Noah to build the ark. We don't know how many years Noah preached repentance to his neighbors. We do know they carried on with their lives with no thought for the crazy old man and his boat. We do know they drowned in the waters that lasted for about a year.

And Jesus warns us that it will be like those days when He returns again. And He has created an ark for safe passage through the judgment of God. The ark of Noah has long been associated with the ark of the church. The flood is God's righteous judgment against the sin of man. The destruction of earth and the judgment of man when Jesus opens the sixth seal is God's righteous judgment against the sin of man.

The earth will be re-created because it is ruined by our sin. God will make it anew, but perfect in every way. And then He will fill it with a holy people. A people set apart from before the foundation of the world. A people washed clean of all their sin and made holy by the Holy Spirit in their baptism. A people who live not on their own power but by the power of the Word of God. A people who do not neglect to meet together. If salvation depended on us, meeting together, also known as church, would be optional. But salvation does not depend on us, but on the work of Jesus in life and death delivered to us in baptism by the power of the Holy Spirit. The third article of the creed is all about the work of the Holy Spirit in the church:

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

What does this mean? I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian church He daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers. On the Last Day He will raise me and all the dead, and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ. This is most certainly true.

The Holy Spirit gathers a church unto Christ. Church just means assembly whether you're talking Hebrew or Greek. The Holy Spirit assembles a people around water, word, and bread and wine. With these means, He protects you from the righteous wrath of God which is waiting to be revealed. To fall away from the church is to fall away from the protection of the Holy Spirit.

Yet many people fall away from the church. Maybe they fall away because it wasn't really important to their parents. Maybe they fall away because they meet pastors and Christians who are jerks. Maybe they fall away because they are enticed by the desires of the flesh. Maybe they fall away because they become enslaved by work or distraction. Distraction seems to be a particularly enticing master these days. Whatever reason they fall away, the result is the same: they endanger their eternal lives to the pit of hell.

To live apart from the church is to live apart from Christ. Christ comes to us in the church with forgiveness and life. Christ will judge the world, or those outside the church, with righteous wrath and condemnation. The only shelter from the deluge of His wrath is the ark of the church. The only entrance to the ark is through water and Word. And in this ark is forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.

Unlike Noah and his family, who were stuck in the ark, we need to make visits to the mainland. We become stained by the sin of the world as we live our day to day lives. Hymn 716 *I Walk in Danger All the Way*, is a great reminder of this. I considered reciting it to you, but let's sing it. Let's turn in our hymnals to 716.

716 I Walk in Danger All the Way

The first three stanzas that Satan, and trials, and death are real enemies who pursue us night and day. The smell of our sin attracts these would-be assassins. And even though we sin every day, God does not leave us defenseless. He sends angels to guard us. He even sends His own Son to walk with us through the Word and the Holy Spirit. He gives us an eternal perspective. A heavenly perspective.

And this heavenly perspective is found, fed, and nourished in the ark of the church. Not only here at Grace Lutheran, but every church that is centered on Word and Sacrament. Now imagine if you lived your life with that eternal perspective all the time! It would change your moment-to-moment decisions, would it not?

So let us keep our eyes on Jesus. Let us stay protected in His ark, the church. Let us not grow bogged down with the cares of life or signs in the sky. Let us live life with our heads lifted up. Jesus is coming again soon!